



Making Causal Pathways Visible Amid Complexity

Five field-
level
experiments
to advance
causal
thinking in
social change
strategies

Supported by the Walton Family Foundation

Prepared by Jewlya Lynn, PolicySolve
November 2021

Acknowledgements

This exploration of how to make causal pathways visible in social change work was funded by the [Walton Family Foundation](#)'s Strategy, Learning and Evaluation team.

The participants in the process are from around the world, representing many different perspectives and experiences with developing and deploying methods that help to make causal pathways visible.

- ❖ Matthew Carr, Walton Family Foundation (advisor and funder to this process). He can be contacted at: mcarr@wffmail.com
- ❖ Johanna Morariu, Walton Family Foundation (advisor and funder to this process)
- ❖ Jewlya Lynn, PolicySolve (facilitator/lead for this process)
- ❖ Julia Coffman, Center for Evaluation Innovation (advisor to this process)
- ❖ Ann-Murray A. Brown, Independent Consultant
- ❖ Barbara Befani, University of Surrey
- ❖ Carlisle Levine, BLE Solutions, LLC
- ❖ Fiona Remnant, Bath SDR
- ❖ Giel Ton, Institute of Development Studies
- ❖ Heather Britt, NORC, Univ. of Chicago
- ❖ Isabel Musse, Mathematica
- ❖ James Copestake, University of Bath
- ❖ Jeph Mathias, Independent Consultant
- ❖ Marina Apgar, Institute of Development Studies
- ❖ Nina Sabarre, Intention 2 Impact
- ❖ Rick Davies, Independent Consultant
- ❖ Sanjeev Sridharan, Gates India
- ❖ Steve Powell, Causal Map Ltd
- ❖ Tom Aston, Independent
- ❖ Yulianto Dewata, William & Lily Foundation

Introduction & Proposed Actions

In 2021, the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) Strategy, Learning and Evaluation Department undertook a process to identify areas of the larger philanthropic evaluation field that WFF can (1) support; (2) learn from; and (3) provide some level of leadership to as it develops and strengthens over time. One area was identified as [making visible causal pathways in complex, systemic work](#).

This priority was grounded in the learning that there is a history of using experimental/quasi-experimental designs that has not translated effectively to the work many philanthropic organizations are doing today – work that is more context dependent, dynamic, and systems change focused. Rather than reject the importance of causal information, there is a need to lean into new methods (see next page) and revisions to old approaches. In particular, there might be an opportunity to strengthen traditional and newer methodological practices related to equity and rigor around causal analysis, alongside expanding the audiences who can use the methods or are aware of and want to commission their use.

A group of 18 evaluators and methodologists undertook a joint effort to explore this issue as a first step (listed in the acknowledgements above). Together, they surfaced a core premise:

[Making visible the causal pathways in complex, dynamic settings can be an important learning input to the work of social change agents including those in and supported by philanthropy.](#)

They worked together to identify ways to strengthen the ability of social change agents (including philanthropy) to see more deeply into how change is happening and learn from it to inform their strategies (present and future). The second part of this report explores their insights in more depth through the following sections:

[Page 5. A Deeper Investigation of the Premise](#)

[Page 6. Horizon 1: The Present Day System, Strengths & Challenges](#)

[Page 8. Horizon 2: A Set of Proposed Experiments](#)

[Page 11. Horizon 3: A Description of an Ideal Future](#)

[Page 13. Conclusion & Call to Action](#)

Unpacking the concept of causal pathways (and how we make them visible)

Before moving into how to strengthen practices related to exploring causal pathways, a better explanation of the concept is in order. This is a preliminary way of explaining it, recognizing that the participants in the discussions leading to this report are seeking to develop a shared definition as an important next step.

For the purposes of this work, the concept of a causal pathway can be understood as *the way in which change actually happened regardless of the predictions that were made about how it might happen*. In complex, dynamic systems, change is unpredictable, non-linear, and even understood differently depending on the perspective one has from within the system. For all these reasons, measuring outcomes without measuring how they emerged (the causal pathway) risks making inaccurate assumptions about the impact of a intervention. It can also obscure unintended impacts that fall well outside the outcomes predicted by the intervention's designers and implementors.

The measurement of causal pathways can range from (1) primarily testing a pre-planned theory of change to (2) explicitly testing the theory of change and its unintended outcomes to (3) exploring how change is happening more broadly in the system, and then identifying where there is evidence of a given intervention(s) contributing to those changes.

Historically, evaluation relied heavily on quasi-experimental designs to understand causality. However, these methods do not work well in many complex, dynamic settings. Alternative methods are gaining traction, particularly in the international development space, and include such things as: most significant change, outcome harvesting, contribution analysis, qualitative impact assessment protocol, process tracing, and causal maps.

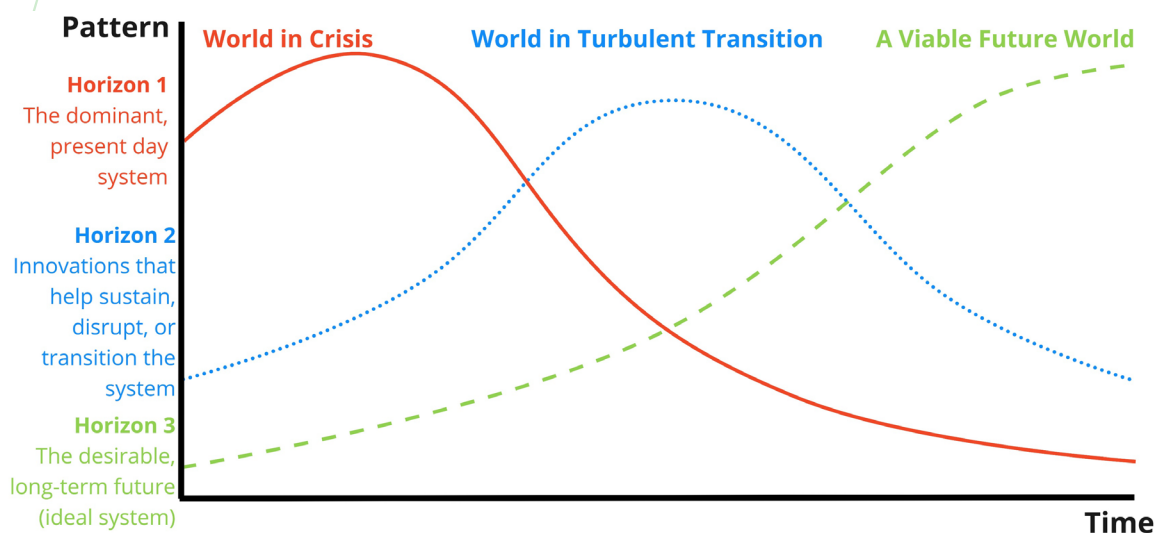
These methods can be implemented in high quality ways that combine qualitative and quantitative data and analytical techniques. They can be implemented in deeply participatory ways that center the voices of those in the system, including those most marginalized. The methods can be exciting to implement as they generate new insights and understanding about how change has happened, but also uncomfortable, as some commissioners and implementors may find disconfirming evidence difficult to incorporate into their mental models.

Introduction & Proposed Actions, Cont.

The planning framework, process, and key outcomes

Participants in the discussion about causal pathways used the Three Horizons framework as a central planning tool. This framework helps to make sense of how systemic transformation happens, getting us out of the habit of planning a linear pathway from today to our desired future. It is a futures thinking tool highly relevant to complexity that invites us to understand the present (its good and bad), experiment with planned actions that can build on the good while disrupting the bad, and allow room for new actions to emerge - all on the way to a visionary future.

Figure 1. The Three Horizons – from today to our ideal future



Horizon 1 is the dominant system at present. It represents 'business as usual'. We rely on these systems being stable and reliable. But as the world changes, so aspects of business as usual begin to feel out of place or no longer fit for purpose. Eventually 'business as usual' will always be superseded by new patterns of activity.

Horizon 2 is a pattern of transition activities and innovations, people trying things out in response to the ways in which the landscape is changing. Some of these innovations will be absorbed into the Horizon 1 systems to improve them (*sustaining* innovations) and to prolong their life, others will change the scope of what is possible (*disrupting* innovations), while some will pave the way for the emergence of the radically different Horizon 3 systems (*transforming* innovations).

Horizon 3 emerges as the long term successor to business as usual. It grows from fringe activity in the present that introduces completely new ways of doing things but which turn out to be much better fitted to the world that is emerging than the dominant H1 systems.

Ultimately, using this description of the present and future, the participants identified five experiments that may be worth initiating, some of which could be brought together into one idea or staged, moving from one into another. They identified their own interest in advancing these experiments, with a belief that they are important next steps for funders, evaluators, and beneficiaries to take together (Table 1, next page).

Introduction & Proposed Actions, Cont.

Table 1. The experiments to strengthen the work to make causal pathways visible

Experiment Short Title	Experiment Premise	Implementing this Activity
1. Building a common definition, building awareness, becoming the next buzz word	The work to understand causal pathways lacks a common definition (and visibility of that definition), which could help the methods be valued and implemented in ways that advance equity.	Likely depends on a gathering of stakeholders, along with support to map influencers and eventually implement agreed upon actions related to the definition.
2. Broaden the participation in deep dialogues about how we make causal pathways visible	If we broaden the conversation and decenter the methods (and methodologists), we may be able to demystify, debunk myths, and explore together how to strengthen the value that comes from making causal pathways visible.	Likely replicates some of the process done to date, but with a much more diverse set of participants, leading to actions not currently envisioned.
3. Experimenting with evaluations that look beyond the intervention	The project-specific focus of most evaluations is harmful in how it centers program theories of change, failing to understand context and obscuring unintended consequences. Our ideal future embraces complexity, divergent and conflicting pathways, and the larger ecosystem of a project.	Will depend on one or more funders being willing to commission a very different type of evaluation, along with potentially a key partner helping to make visible the learnings to the larger field.
4. Experimenting with shifting power within evaluations	We envision a future where participatory methods are not only frequently used, but also where commissioners of evaluation release power over the evaluations to the participants in the program/system, allowing the discovery of multiple pathways, intended and unintended impacts, and the larger context.	Will depend on one or more funders being willing to commission a very different type of evaluation, along with potentially a key partner helping to make visible the learnings to the larger field.
5. Harnessing social media to move beyond the echo chamber of methodologists	Making causal pathways visible can inform strategy and bring value, but the work is not well understood or valued. Often evaluators aren't speaking to wider audiences in understandable, compelling ways.	Likely could be done more informally than the other experiments, with loose coordination, individually implemented feedback loops, and ongoing information sharing across participants.

The Walton Family Foundation is exploring where it might contribute to this work, while also looking to identify other partners who may want to participate in advancing these ideas.

A Deeper Investigation of the Premise

The participants in the process articulated a set of assumptions about the issue of making causal pathways visible. These assumptions became the basis of the shared articulation of Horizons 1 (the present), 2 (the process of change), and 3 (the ideal future).

Perhaps most important among the assumptions are the ones that tell us that this work is meaningful, necessary, and can help advance equity and justice.

Assumption: Making causal pathways visible amid complexity **can inform strategy** (along the way, as strategy ends, and after strategy has ended)

Assumption: Alternative methods for making causal pathways visible **can be implemented in deeply participatory ways**, making visible patterns of change and parts of the system otherwise difficult to see or misunderstood.

Assumption: **Participatory approaches (from design through interpretation and use)** are a necessary part of achieving rigor when measuring causal pathways.

"In participatory work, rigor is about the sensemaking process being rigorous. That's where we have a lot of room to learn still – the way we do sensemaking is a bit of a mystery. We need to demystify it, break it down." – Marina Apgar

- In Europe, there is a focus on contribution and the quality of the implementation of methods, in part because of the international development context, and a recognition that the project must be understood in ways that honor complexity and don't look to find a linear line.
- In the US, there is a thrust toward equity-driven, empowering evaluations, with less focus on the rigor of the study design, methods, and their application.
- There are evaluators that bridge these two ways of focusing the work, including with a recognition that there are many different types of expertise that bring value. This mindset opens the door to engaging the expertise of those with lived experience in the design of evaluations, while also tapping the methodological expertise of more traditionally trained evaluators.

Assumption: Making causal pathways visible can **focus on what is emerging and in what context**, rather than primarily testing or confirming the TOC.

"It's not just a second-best alternative to experimental work – it gives answers you cannot see through experiments (quasi or otherwise)." – Barbara Befani

Horizon 1: The Present-Day System, Strengths & Challenges

Together, the participants in the process surfaced patterns within the current system. For many participants the **challenges related to making causal pathways visible are not unique to this work, but rather are embedded in a larger set of issues**, including:

“All of these methods are about the intervention – not about asking what actually moves a problem in a system. Methods are small dances that contribute to a larger problem – the fundamental mistake is to see purely your intervention.” – (Participant)

- The use of theories of change as a primary tool in programs and evaluations. For some of us, this itself is problematic, while for others, it is how and with whom they are developed and how they are used that leads to difficulties.
- The **need for more and better participatory evaluations**, recognizing there is the space for participation even amid the most technical of methods.
- The **designs of programs**, and questions about whether they are likely to lead to decreased inequities and sustainable change.
- The commissioning of **evaluations with a narrow focus** on the impact of programs, measured at the point of delivery, centering the perspectives of the funder.

Other challenges in Horizon 1 are more specific to making causal pathways visible, including:

- The **lack of clear definition of what we mean by causal pathways**, whose pathways we are referring to, how closely tied the pathways are to the interventions, and whether we seek multiple, potentially conflicting, ways of understanding the pathways.
- The **complexity of the methods** results in a need for methods specific training and coaching in order to use them well.
- That many evaluators are using a preferred method, even when the method is **not fit for purpose** in a specific evaluation.

“The use of the methods is being hampered by the volatile and reactive nature of philanthropy. It is critical that retrospective findings are being used to keep challenging pathways and keep building institutional knowledge.” – Nina Sabre

“The methodologists are very fixated on pitching their methods, defending them, leading to making causal claims too widely.” – Tom Aston

Horizon 1: The Present-Day System, Strengths & Challenges, Cont.

These challenges in the system are balanced by the **present-day strengths in the methods and ways of making causal pathways visible** – elements we can strengthen and bring into the future. Specifically:

- Making causal pathways visible amid complexity can inform strategy and test implicit and explicit assumptions; and
- There are many good methods to do this work, and these methods...
 - Can be implemented in **deeply participatory** ways
 - Can be implemented in **high quality, rigorous** ways
 - Can focus on **what is emerging**, not just testing/confirming a theory of change
 - Can include exploring multiple and even **divergent or conflicting pathways**, emerging from different perspectives and experiences

“Rigor is making the hidden parts of the system visible – listening to the whole of the system.” – Jeph Mathias

“The beauty of these methods is that you capture unexpected change... unintended change, good or bad.” - Ann-Murray Brown

“We don’t need more methods. We need to learn by doing, to improve the methods each time by doing.” – Fiona Remnant

“Quasi-experimental folks think the only way to get counterfactuals is via experimental groups. But what matters is the counterfactual thinking – not just the way data is captured.” - Giel Ton

The present-day system can be disrupted and transformed in many different ways as part of Horizon 2. Some of these ways may lean into the strengths, leveraging the methods and actors that are assets. Other actions may disrupt problematic dynamics, making room for something new.



Horizon 2: A Set of Proposed Experiments

Together, the participants in the process identified five initial actions that can build on what is working in the present day, disrupt what is getting in the way, and help us transform to our ideal future.

The first two focus on strengthening the collective understanding of this concept – making causal pathways visible – and expanding who is part of the conversation.

Experiment Premise	Experiment Core Activities	What will it take?
1. Building a common definition, building awareness, becoming the next buzz word		
The work to understand causal pathways lacks a common definition (and visibility of that definition), which could help the methods be valued and implemented in ways that advance equity.	STEP 1: Align on a definition of causal pathways. STEP 2a: Build capacity and visibility of the definition. STEP 2b: Seek to influence decision-makers.	One or more leads to create the discussion space, generate materials, and engage in influence mapping. Resources to bring partners together (likely virtually).
2. Broaden the participation in deep dialogues about how we make causal pathways visible		
If we broaden the conversation and decenter the methods (and methodologists), we may be able to demystify, debunk myths, and explore together how to strengthen the value that comes from making causal pathways visible.	STEP 1: Plan an inclusive conversation, one that addresses a similar premise as the one hosted with methodologists, but brings in new voices STEP 2: With these stakeholders, generate a plan to work on elements of the system	One or more leads to create the discussion space, generate materials, and engage in influence mapping. Resources to bring partners together (likely virtually).

Horizon 2: A Set of Proposed Experiments, Cont.

The next two experiments challenge commissioners of evaluation and evaluators to advance the practice of making causal pathways visible, including moving beyond the typical programmatic focus and timeline and changing who has power over the evaluation.

Experiment Premise	Experiment Core Activities	What will it take?
3. Experimenting with evaluations that look beyond the intervention		
<p>The project-specific focus of most evaluations is harmful in how it centers program theories of change, failing to understand context and obscuring unintended consequences. Our ideal future embraces complexity, divergent and conflicting pathways, and the larger ecosystem of a project.</p>	<p>STEP 1: Seek opportunities for commissioners of evaluation and their evaluators to shift evaluations to look beyond projects</p> <p>STEP 2a: Learn from, make visible, evolve, and scale</p> <p>STEP 2b: Align the types of learning across studies</p>	<p>One or more commissioners of evaluation willing to solicit a very different type of evaluation.</p> <p>One or more evaluation teams able to implement the experimental approach.</p> <p>One or more leads to compile and share insights with the field across evaluations.</p>
4. Experimenting with shifting power within evaluations		
<p>We envision a future where participatory methods are not only frequently used, but also where commissioners of evaluation release power over the evaluations to the participants in the program/system, allowing discovering of multiple pathways, intended and unintended impacts, and the larger context.</p>	<p>STEP 1: Seek opportunities for commissioners of evaluation to shift power via evaluations without predefined questions</p> <p>STEP 2: Learn from, make visible, evolve, and scale</p> <p>STEP 3: Develop an influence plan for how to share the insights</p>	<p>One or more commissioners of evaluation willing to solicit a very different type of evaluation.</p> <p>One or more evaluation teams able to implement the experimental approach.</p> <p>One or more leads to compile and share insights with the field across evaluations.</p>

“Our current programming approaches in philanthropy and government, that is, our planning, our modeling, and our MEL (monitoring, evaluation, & learning) are all predicated largely around a paradigm that is suited to centralized power. The pictures we draw and the stories that we tell with MEL reinforce this – set us up to tell a hero story about social change that feeds the power structure and emphasizes the role of single donor actors.” – Heather Britt

“There are risks associated with these methods – that the story isn’t your intended story. These come from how we define change, whose changes matter.” – Yulianto Dewata

Horizon 2: A Set of Proposed Experiments, Cont.

The final experiment is a more informal and open exploration of how to build awareness of the importance and ways of making causal pathways visible in social change work. It also seeks to share the results of these types of evaluations more broadly.

“Evolution is a creative process of recombination. Yet, an elementary part of this is the willingness to share the stuff you find useful. Evaluations are contracted pieces of work and confidentiality concerns impede sharing.” – Rick Davies

Experiment Premise	Experiment Core Activities	What will it take?
5. Harnessing social media to move beyond the echo chamber of methodologists		
Making causal pathways visible can inform strategy and bring value, but the work is not well understood or valued. Often evaluators aren't speaking to wider audiences in understandable, compelling ways.	STEP 1a: Learn from social media influencers STEP 1b: Learn from experiments – explorations with different stakeholder groups on how to best communicate	One or more leads to create a space for information sharing, populating insights from multiple social media experiments. A variety of different experimenters, ideally with existing social media reach and skills. Permission from the commissioners of evaluation to share results in accessible ways online.

As is true anytime we envision experiments that can move a larger field toward action, there will be challenges along the way.

Some of these challenges can be resolved by adding positive “fuel” to the process – financial resources, dedicated and supported leaders to maintain momentum, supportive institutions to lend credibility and visibility, etc.

Some of these challenges can be resolved by removing friction in the process – participants agreeing to norms that minimize competition for opportunities that emerge, expansions of participation balanced by creating respectful, accessible environments.

All of these challenges can be overcome, and through collaborative work together the field can progress toward Horizon 3, an ideal future.

Horizon 3: A Description of an Ideal Future

Together, the participants in the process described a future where causal pathways are visible and are having an impact on social change strategies.

For many of us, our ideal future builds on ideas much larger than just causal pathways; ideas that philanthropy is grappling with more broadly. We described a future where:

- **Philanthropy is more accountable and transparent**, including publicly sharing their theories about how change will happen.
- Funders have shifted their relationship to their stakeholders, acting with **greater humility and empathy**, and giving more room for others to shape their strategies, leading to "true and direct" participation of those in the system.
- Philanthropic work is **more centered on the roots of inequities** and ultimately has a greater impact on the social issues it seeks to address.

When participants told stories from the future that relate to shifts in philanthropic practice (and funders more broadly) and the visibility of causal pathways, they envisioned future stakeholders (in 2035) saying such things as:

"It pays off to fuel discussion and dissent about pathways – and discuss the reasons of the dissent." -*A future philanthropic CEO*

"I've got the space to act!" -*A future community member*

"The technology to enable the collection of experiences from a range of perspectives has revolutionized this sector." -*Evaluator*

"Now we are more agile and adaptable and can withstand unexpected changes" -*A future nonprofit leader*

Horizon 3: A Description of an Ideal Future, Cont.

Some parts of our vision for the future are more specific to causal pathways, the methods, and the methodologists, including:

“It’s actually the need for equity that pushes your study to be more rigorous.” – Isabel Musse

“Rigor and equity are stuck in our cultural conflict right now – equity folks sometimes perceive rigor as a white supremacist notion and desire to abandon it. Reclaiming rigor is a way of reframing this.” – Carlisle Levine

- Causal pathway methodologists have **overcome brands and egos** and are focused on what methods work, when, and how to combine them.
- Evaluators, commissioners of evaluation, and program officers have a **nuanced understanding of what causality** means.
- Causal pathway methodologists have diversified and reclaimed definitions of **rigor**.
- **Complexity** is centered in how the methods that make causal pathways visible are deployed.
- Many evaluators are **skilled and able to deploy methods** to make causal pathways visible.
- **Commissioners of evaluation** and program officers are supporting evaluations that center complexity, utilize participatory processes, discover what is not working (negative impacts), and make multiple causal pathways visible.
- **Participatory evaluation** in this area has expanded with technology as a powerful enabling tool.



Conclusion & Call to Action

Together, these 20 thought leaders unpacked the current state, the ideal future, and experiments worth trying all related to a shared understanding:

Making visible the causal pathways in complex, dynamic settings can be an important learning input to the work of social change agents including those in and supported by philanthropy.

Horizon 1 (the present):

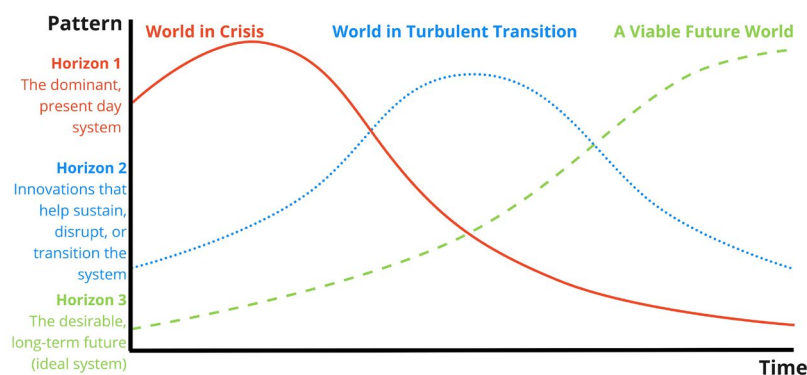
They discovered a present that (1) has plenty of high quality methods ready to use (though perhaps not enough people ready to deploy them), but lacks will to use the methods, for reasons ranging from the design of the interventions being studied to how the methods are being deployed.

Horizon 2 (the transition):

They identified five ways to try to shift these dynamics, ranging from building clarity and shared understanding of the opportunity to make causal pathways visible to experimenting with how to do so in new ways within new evaluation contexts.

Horizon 3 (the ideal future):

They described a future where the visibility of causal pathways is one of many tools that help to advance power shifting in both philanthropy and the social change strategies that seek to advance equity.



The Horizon 2 experiments, designed to bring us closer to Horizon 3, will only happen if funders, evaluators, and the beneficiaries and implementors of strategies are in partnership. Please contact [Matthew Carr](#) at the Walton Family Foundation if you're ready to join this conversation and help shape the next steps.