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Rationale for whole systems approaches and what it means for evaluation and learning

Summary

Why whole systems and place-based approaches are necessary for understanding influences on physical activity

- Influences on physical activity are complex. Levels of activity differ among individuals depending on a wide range of factors including personal characteristics, home and work life, the nature of places and the influence of wider social trends, media and culture.
- A whole systems approach aims to address barriers and opportunities at all these different levels to enable people to be physically active.
- A place based approach is a whole systems approach within a defined location. It is community-focused and led by the drive and insights of the people who live and work there.

Rethinking traditional models of 'impact' and evaluation

- Physical activity programmes don't work in isolation. They take place in a setting where there are existing initiatives, other public services and a range of local stakeholders already doing things.
- Traditional models of 'impact' look at an intervention in isolation to understand the difference it has made. This isn't feasible where the 'intervention' itself is changed by the context and setting as it becomes part of the local system.

Rethinking evidence

- We rely on a combination of stories (qualitative data) and numbers (quantitative data) to provide explanations that will help us improve our future work.
- Stories can help us understand what it is that makes a difference and how and why change happens in the real world. Numbers and statistics can give us a sense of how widespread things are and enable us to look at patterns within them.

- Numbers and stories need to be rooted in the experience and lives of people to really understand what drives levels of physical activity and what can support change. It is vital to value local insights.
- There is a need to take community insight and action more seriously and move beyond consultation on preconceived projects.

Applying what we learn

- We need to be transparent about gaps in our knowledge and what we need to do next. This doesn't stop us learning about things that matter and refining our explanations. We need to focus on improving rather than proving.
- Explanatory frameworks (highlighting key dynamics and influences) can give us important pointers about what might work in new settings, and inform decisions about adapting to a new place.
- Working together respectfully with people who experience disadvantage can help avoid the risk of making things worse with well-meaning interventions that don't address the real issues on the ground.
- We need a different approach to 'scale'. Rather than expect to find one size fits all solutions, we need an 'association' model of scale. In depth understanding of local innovations in different settings can be shared and support collaboration across places.

The need to change, learn and adapt

- It is increasingly understood that complexity is a fundamental part of the world we live in. We are used to navigating complexity in our everyday lives, but it is only now being fully recognised in evaluation terms.
- It demands a more 'adaptive' approach to doing things and learning as we go. But we can still be rigorous and systematic in the way we apply ourselves to our work.
- Many of us in the public and third sector are trying to work and evaluate differently and there is an opportunity to explore what these ideas might mean in all of our work and share examples, insights and inspiration.

Why whole systems and place-based approaches are necessary for understanding influences on physical activity

Influences on levels of physical activity are complex. People's levels of physical activity, like with many aspects of life, are influenced by a combination of things. It is not easy to unravel the many reasons why some people are more active than others. Some of these reasons are personal, due to preferences and levels of motivation. Some are due to circumstances, such as family or work commitments sapping time and energy. And in some places it is easier to be active than others - where walking routes and cycle paths are safe, and facilities accessible. All of these influences interact to produce the patterns of physical activity that we actually see in different places over time. Recognising this complexity means that when trying to understand how a programme works or doesn't work well, it is important to consider the range of contextual factors e.g. the whole system, it is operating within.



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For example, let's say that you were trying to understand girls' experiences of school PE and why there is such a decline in physical activity participation within secondary school settings. You would need to go beyond the school environment to explore 'what is going on in the system?' i.e. the wider factors that influence girls' attitudes, perceptions and behaviour e.g. family life, friendship groups, pressure from society, in addition to the school's ethos around physical activity, whether the students have a say, the opportunities, style and type of delivery, the kit etc.

At the same time, each place is unique – it's history, it's housing and surrounding environment, availability of work and levels of wealth, and the particular mix of people in terms of age, ethnicity, and types of households. The combination of factors in each place also influences levels of physical activity. A place-based approach is a particular type of systems approach to raising levels of physical activity within a defined location. It is focused on a locality and in designing interventions it considers the distinctive mix of local characteristics in that place. It needs to be rooted in the initiative and insights of the people who live and work there.

Rethinking traditional models of 'impact' and evaluation

Accepting the multiple, interacting influences on physical activity and sports provision also means that simple models of 'cause and effect' do not hold. In a very real sense, any intervention is never the same twice, because it interacts with the setting it is in, and may lead to a different result in different places, at different times, with different people.

We need a better way of understanding 'if, for who, and under what circumstances' things work. Traditional models of evaluation and 'impact' generally try to isolate the effect of an intervention away from all of the other influences that are happening at the same time using experimental or controlled studies. But finding comparison sites for such controlled studies is often impractical because of their uniqueness – there can be no exact match. In addition, conditions and contexts change over time (for example a global pandemic!) and comparing something 'before and after' cannot account for this changing environment.

It is arguably more useful to understand and explain how all the influences are interacting with one another and working together – to produce different outcomes in different settings. This doesn't mean everything is chaotic. There may be some common features that appear across places and that help to explain what is going on. Developing explanatory frameworks that account for key dynamics and influences means that they can be tested against evidence of what actually happens to refine them further.

Building explanations and focusing on what matters

Being clear about what we need to understand and focusing evaluation and learning efforts on the things that we agree to be important can help us to identify the right evaluation questions, for example:

- We may want to understand how people build collaborative relationships and partnership working across different sectors and organisations. Network evaluation tools can help to assess the quality of relationships, the extent of joint working and the alignment of values.
- We may want to understand increased community confidence by charting the growth in resident-led initiatives, tracking to what extent community ideas are informing local action, and looking at the balance of power and control of resources between professionals and residents.
- We may want to understand how wider patterns of inequality or working conditions affect people's motivations and opportunities to act.

Rethinking evidence

It is by focusing on understanding and explaining the things that matter, that we can make progress and enhance future work. To do this we need to draw on, and bring together, different sources of insight including numbers and stories.

Numbers might seem to provide certainty, but do they measure the right things? Stories may appear convincing but are they representative of the key processes that matter? To understand and address the range of factors influencing physical activity, we need to combine insights from both qualitative and quantitative approaches and take an integrated approach that focuses on explaining what makes a difference.

Careful qualitative work (e.g., open ended interviews, stories of change) can clarify what matters to people, the things that make a difference, and how and why change happens in the real world. Quantitative work (numbers and statistics) can provide a sense of how widespread certain outcomes are and look at trends and patterns across time and place. Both are needed when we try to understand complex situations. Bringing insights together in rigorous case studies – whether of places, people, or types of activities - can help understand the combination of factors that make a difference to levels of physical activity.

Valuing local insights

There is a need for people with knowledge of the everyday realities influencing physical activity to be involved. They should have a role in defining what matters and what makes a difference if we are going to understand what drives levels of physical activity and foster change. This means building respectful and collaborative relationships and using participatory methods that involve people in deciding how to measure change and make sense of different information and data. This means more than just consulting community members on pre-conceived plans for physical activity interventions. Community insights may highlight unexpected barriers and enablers for physical activity which may not be otherwise obvious. Community action drawing on local community networks and initiatives may be a vital precursor to change, even if they seem to have an indirect relationship to physical activity.

Applying what we learn

Turning learning into action – evidence informing action

The challenge of understanding complexity means we need to be humble about the partial extent of our knowledge. We may need to trade in a desire for certainty and one-off verdicts about 'what works', for more modest efforts to build explanations through ongoing efforts to evaluate and learn. We may need to step back and look at the bigger picture and how all the different influences

interact. This means accepting some uncertainty and seeking to improve rather than prove, focusing on the direction of travel rather than having final, definitive answers.

Applying learning in new settings

Humility about the partial extent of our knowledge doesn't stop us learning about things that matter. Our explanatory frameworks - built through cumulative insights and evidence gathered across places and over time – provide an understanding of the key dynamics and influences driving physical activity (or acting as barriers).

If we understand why things work in some contexts and not in others, it helps when we want to apply them in new settings. Rather than expecting to transfer interventions with 'fidelity' from one place to another, our explanatory frameworks can provide an understanding of how particular activities and ideas may work and the contexts in which they typically do, or do not. In this way, explanatory frameworks can provide decision support to guide future action in context.

This also suggests we need to rethink the notion of scale. We shouldn't expect to find one size fits all solutions and then implement them 'at scale'. A different approach is to build an appreciative and in depth understanding of innovations made in different settings which can be shared to inform work in other places. This 'association model' of scale seeks to learn in a diversity of places and link them up for sharing of insight and increasing co-ordination and collaboration across places.

The need to learn and adapt: recognising we need an 'adaptive' approach

We need to try things - test and learn - and be prepared to adapt our approaches based on what happens, or doesn't happen, and what it is that we need to understand. We learn both from measurement, but also from action and seeing how the overall system responds. Ongoing evaluation and learning needs to be embedded in our work and used to inform these adjustments.

There are some useful frameworks that can support flexible ways of working in the international development sector, among others. Many people in the physical activity sector are increasingly using a 'test and learn' approach to work in an adaptive way, and there are examples of physical activity programmes that have also embraced an adaptive approach.

Given the scope and ambition of strategies like Uniting the Movement, there is a need to invest in evaluation and learning approaches that are adaptive, include diverse voices, understand the local context, and repeatedly check the usefulness of the results for local implementers, communities and individuals.

Making the journey together

Working and measuring differently together: we are seeing that there are many allies across the public and third sector who are trying to work and evaluate differently, and be responsive to the people who they aim to serve. Working together to explore what these ideas might mean for you and your colleagues is one way to help people see alternative ways for monitoring, evaluation and learning to address some of these complex problems. You may have examples of changes in your systems that wouldn't have been noticed or celebrated if you were simply counting outcomes. These are stories you can share with others to reinforce the value of measuring differently.

Further resources

- National Evaluation & Learning Partnership, December 2023. **Introductory briefing: A different way of learning and assessing impact in approaches to support physical activity.**
- National Evaluation & Learning Partnership, December 2023. **Explainer: Introduction to Configurational Comparative Analysis.**

Key terms explained

Whole systems approach: A whole systems approach is defined as 'responding to complexity' through a 'dynamic way of working', bringing stakeholders, including communities, together to develop 'a shared understanding of the challenge' and integrate action to bring about sustainable, long-term systems change (Buck et al, 2018). This way of working can also sometimes be described as a 'whole of systems' approach.

Place-based approach: A place-based approach is a systems approach within a defined location. It requires collaborative working with the people who live and work in a locality, to take a person-centred and bottom-up approach to gain knowledge, insight and resources. A place-based approach aims to build a picture of the 'system' from a local perspective, taking an asset-based approach that seeks to highlight the strengths, capacity and knowledge of all those involved.

Explanatory framework: An explanatory framework or model is a useful description of why and how something works. Explanatory theories are created to help to understand complexity and as an aid to support delivery by suggesting testable causal theories of situations and circumstances.

Participatory methods/approaches: Participatory methods are part of a mix of evaluation activities which are person-centred and bottom up. The enable wide ranging people to play an active and influential role in the decisions which affect their lives. This means that people are not just listened to, but also heard; and that their voices shape outcomes.

Experimental controlled studies: It is not often possible for researchers to undertake controlled/experimental studies within this environment because to do so they would need to introduce an intervention and study the effects. It is very difficult to isolate 'cause and effect' due to the complex series of influences and all the moving parts, and the fact that physical activity programmes cannot work in isolation.

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