

Pragmatic Tips for Evaluating Conservation Programs

Elizabeth O'Neill

Conservation Coaches Network

22 February 2018



OPENING QUESTIONS

- When you hear the word “evaluation,” how do you feel? What do you think?
- What do you hope to get from this presentation?

MODERNIZING EVALUATION IN CONSERVATION

- Evaluations are done less in conservation than other sectors (e.g., health, education, development) (exceptions – NFWF, some WWF, USFWS Africa, obviously GEF and several European funders...)
- When they are done, tend to be fairly intensive, expensive, and externally led.
- Often “expert opinion” versus true evidence-based, objective analysis.
- Often commissioned by (and therefore for) “someone else.”

Program teams, M&E staff, funders can do more to a) do more evaluation better and b) ensure programs themselves get the most out of them.

THIS PRESENTATION

- Deciding why you are evaluating
- Deciding what you are evaluating
- Deciding on evaluation approach
- Determining data/info needs and collect and use
- Summary of key points

Note 1: General steps and tips, not a comprehensive guide

Note 2: Assumes evals ranging from internal to external

WHY EVALUATE?

WHY EVALUATE?

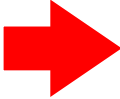
- Three main reasons:
 - ✓ Enhancing **effectiveness** of ongoing efforts by developing recommendations for improving design or implementation.
 - ✓ Enhancing **accountability, credibility, and transparency** with respect to investment.
 - ✓ Improving overall impact by drawing key lessons for broader programmatic, organizational, sectoral **learning**.
- Reasons for evaluating should be defined by intended audiences, and *foremost among these should be program first, and org and funders second (but that's not usually how it's done).*

WHAT TO EVALUATE?

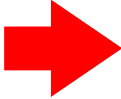
First, how do we work?



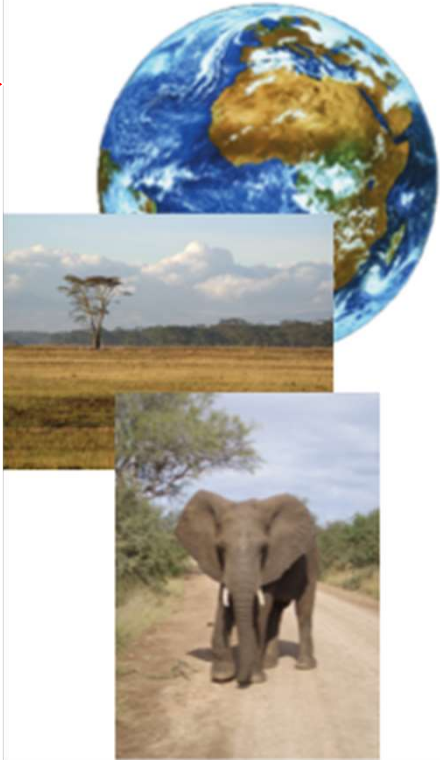
Strategic Approach to Affecting Situation

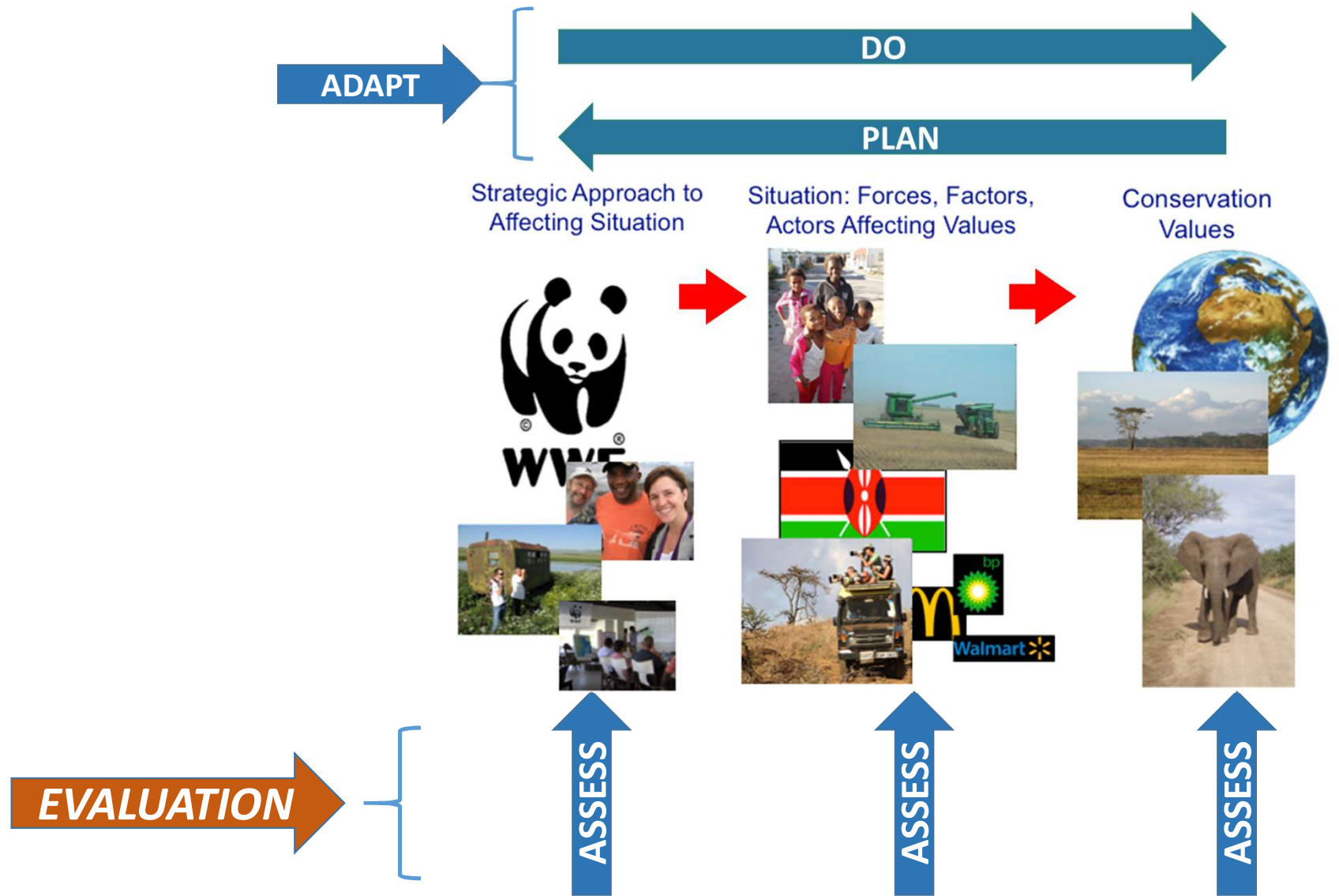


Situation: Forces, Factors, Actors Affecting Values

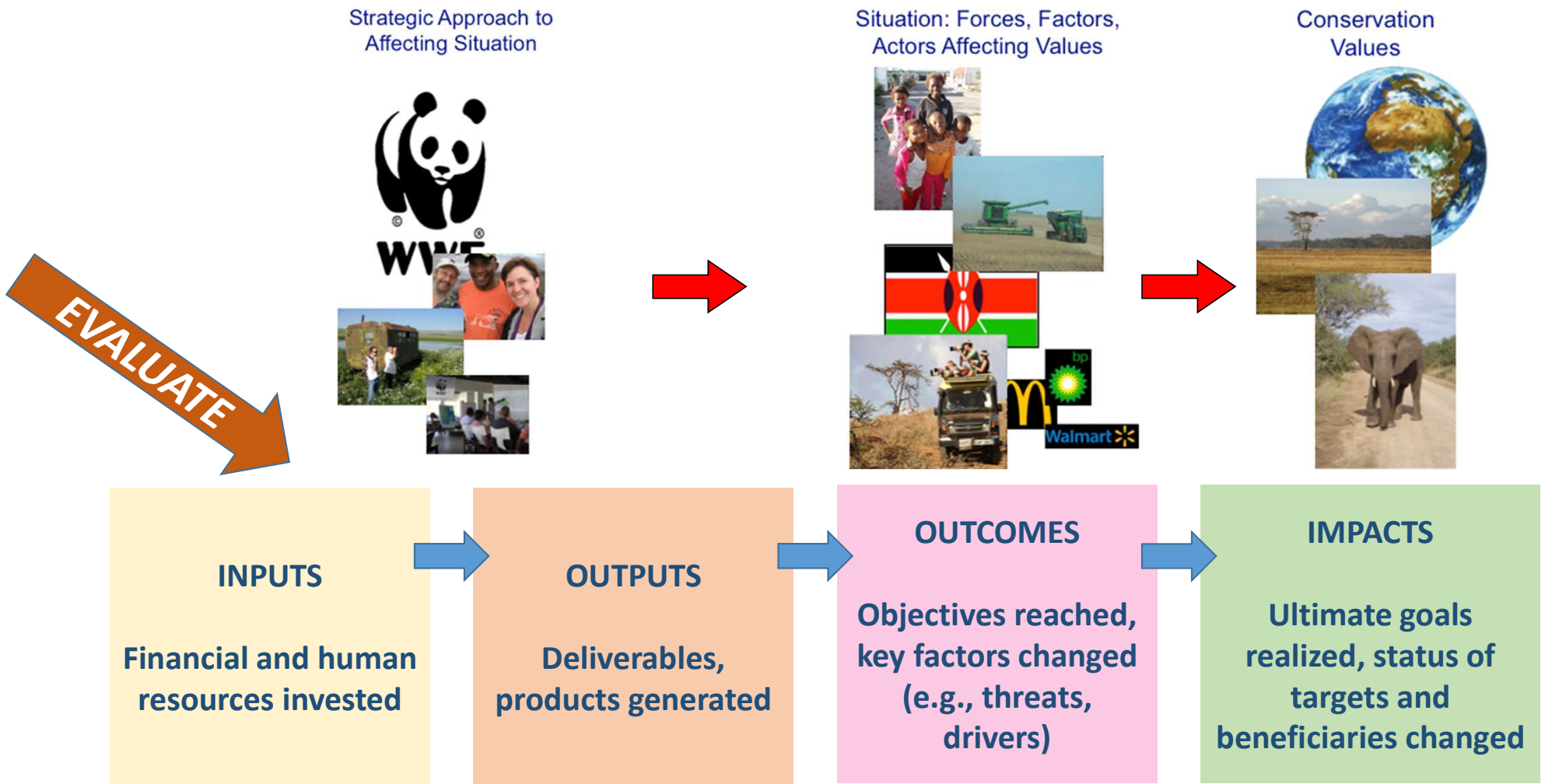


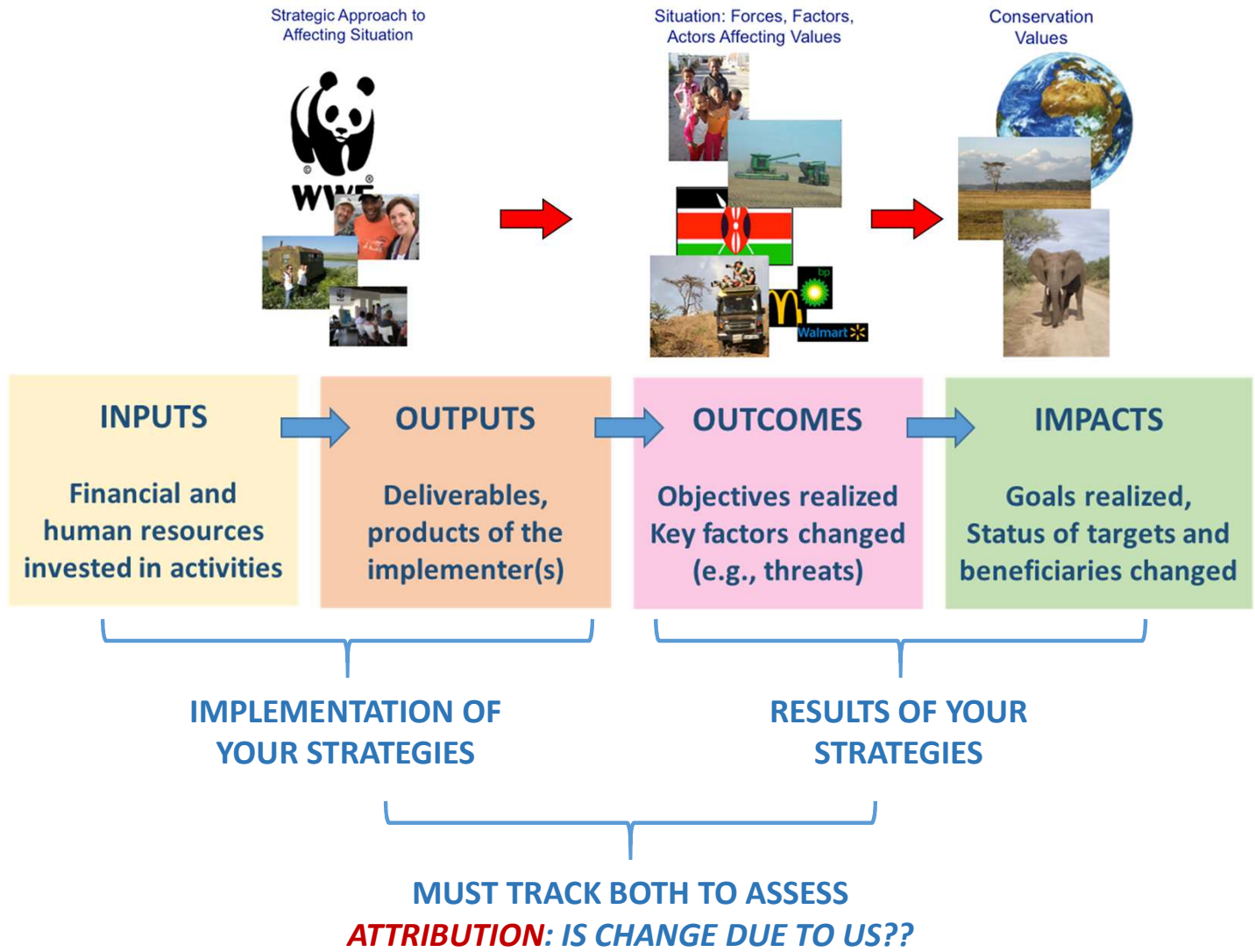
Conservation Values





In terms of a generic results chain

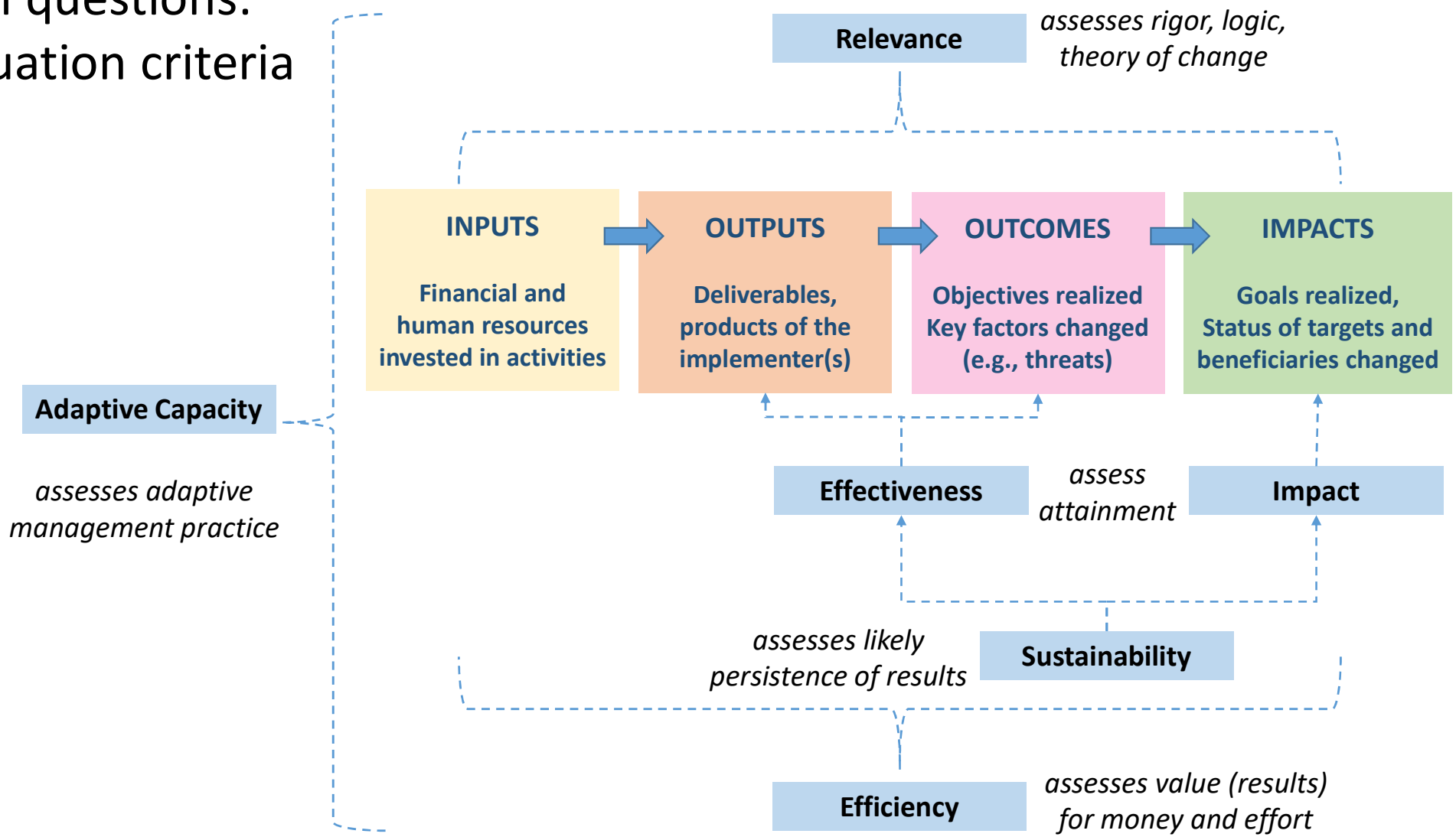




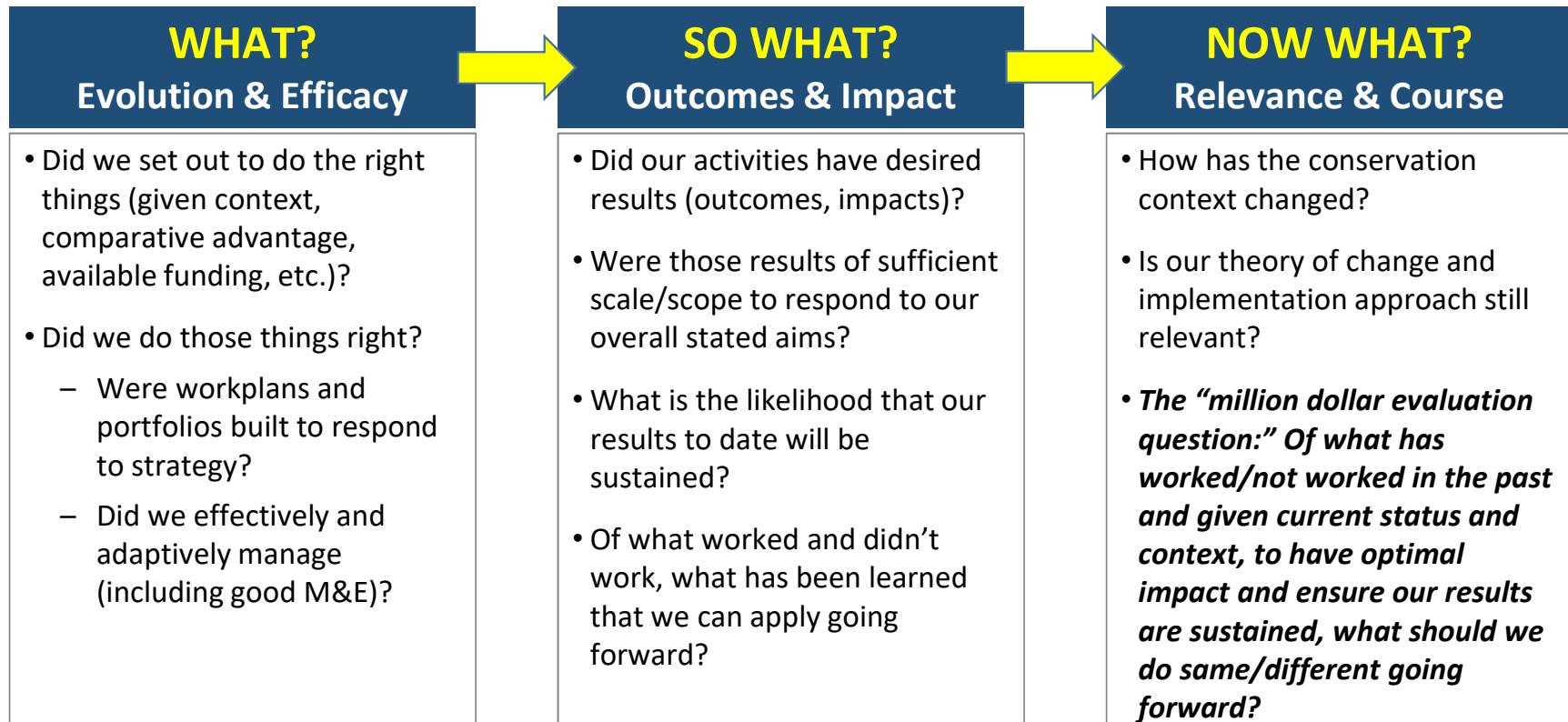
What to evaluate? Industry-standard evaluation criteria

- **Relevance:** Is our strategic design likely to have desired outcomes and ultimate impacts? Is it the “best” course of action? Necessary and sufficient?
- **Effectiveness:** To what extent have our outcomes—targeted changes in understanding, behavior, or key conditions—been achieved? Are those changes a result of our efforts?
- **Impact:** To what extent have targeted changes in the health or status of ultimate beneficiaries been achieved? Are those changes a result of our efforts?
- **Efficiency:** What is the relationship between our outputs and inputs? Are we getting desired Return on Investment?
- **Sustainability:** Is it likely that positive results of our program will continue after our effort ends? (Assess: Are we building the necessary constituency, capacity, capital?)
- **Adaptive Capacity:** Are we applying effective adaptive management practice to ensure that we are making thoughtful and (ideally) evidence-based decisions?

Focal questions: Evaluation criteria



Another approach to defining evaluation questions



Note: The “What? So what? Now what?” evaluative framework is a very simple and handy way to structure team reflection sessions. Everyone gets it.

DECIDE ON EVALUATION APPROACH: WHO, WHEN

WHO TO EVALUATE?

- “Evaluation” ≠ External Independent Evaluation (“EIE”). Options:
 - On your own, in your head
 - Self-assessment with your team through reflection meetings
 - Facilitated self-assessment with team and experienced evaluator/facilitator
 - Peer + Independent evaluation teams
 - Externally led assessment
- The key is using best available evidence to ask and answer your evaluative questions on a regular basis.

SAMPLE SELF-EVALUATION EXERCISE: WITH YOUR TEAM--

- Write down at least two of your project/program’s goals (*desired changes in targeted biodiversity and human beneficiaries*) and at least two objectives (*desired changes in key threats, drivers, behaviors*), as defined at the start.
- Answer questions below, rating yourselves (*poor, fair, good, don’t know*).
- Write a brief justification for your answers – *How do you know? What’s your evidence?*
- If you can’t answer the questions with sufficient confidence/data, *what information are you missing that you need to start collecting?*
- Based on your answers, what should you improve??

Criterion	Assessment Questions
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the likelihood that your strategic approach will attain desired changes in drivers and targets? (<i>Think about ‘strategic alignment,’ necessity vs. sufficiency, and Know how to + Want to/Have to + Able to</i>)
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent have you made progress as planned toward attainment of your <u>objectives</u>? Where you see change in targeted forces/factors/actors, can you attribute that to <i>your</i> work?
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent have you made progress as planned toward attainment of your <u>goals</u>? Where you see change in the status of biodiversity and human beneficiaries, can you attribute that to <i>your</i> work?
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How much effort/money have you invested since project start? Given your results (progress on objectives and goals), how do you feel about ROI: are you efficiently “converting” effort and money into results?
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If your team left tomorrow, what is the likelihood that the results you have achieved would be sustained? What about effort or momentum that you hope would continue?

WHEN TO EVALUATE?

- When do we design and do evaluation?
Follow the OS!
- Evaluation is integral to the entire adaptive management process, not an isolated or “after-the-fact” step in design and management.
- So plan for evaluation within program design, and do regularly.
- Valuable evaluative questioning can happen every year but periodicity depends on nature of question, e.g., impact every several years, effectiveness (progress on outcomes) annually, efficiency annually...
- Plan evaluations well in advance, whether internal or external.



GETTING THE MOST OUT OF EIEs

EIEs consume a lot of time and resources. To get the most out of them:

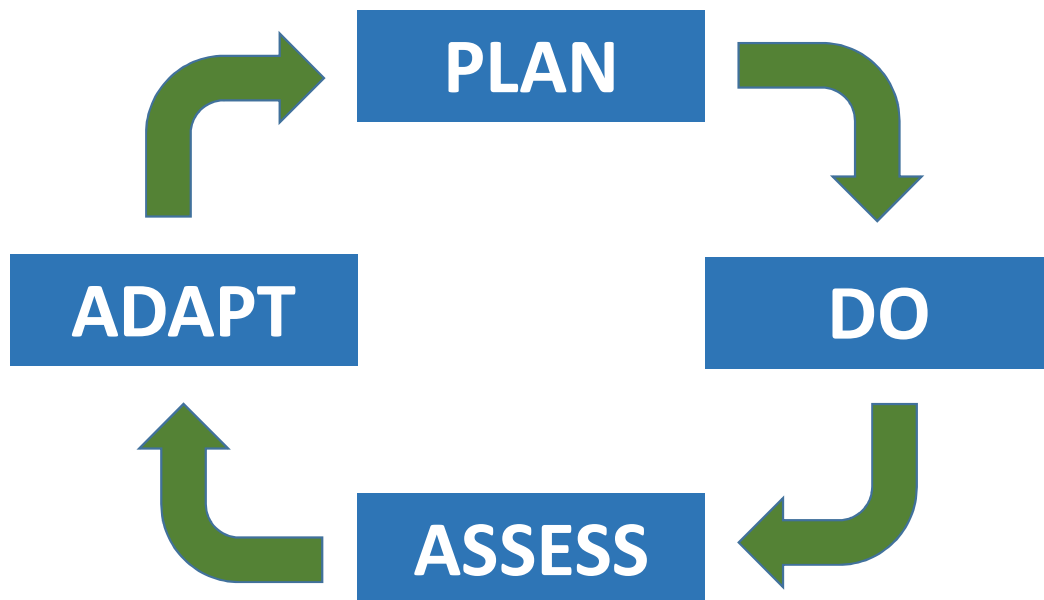
- Ensure the program to be evaluated engages in the TOR process. Make sure purpose and focal questions responds to the program's evaluative and learning priorities.
- Bundle evaluations and plan/schedule proactively wherever possible – org HQs and funders will be asking many of the same questions.
- Where possible, ensure approach includes facilitated self-assessment, participation. Turn it into a reflection/learning opportunity and promote ownership.
- Push back on poor timing and excessive information or duration requests.
- Weigh in on evaluator selection – make sure it is a qualified evaluator, not just someone who will give an “expert opinion.”
- Anticipate, gather, and manage evaluation data/info.
- Ensure the evaluator gives summary presentation(s) to team – both preliminary and final results (reading the report takes time...).

WHAT DATA DO YOU NEED?

MONITORING POINT 1: A perfect plan and perfect monitoring data are not prerequisites to doing evaluations.

Going “full-cycle” regularly with best available information is far better than:

- getting through only a couple of steps (Plan-Do-Plan-Do...) with perfect information,
- or deciding NOT to evaluate because you don’t have a perfectly completed plan or perfect monitoring data.



First get in the groove of going “full cycle” as best you can.

Iterate, iterate, iterate.

Then worry about improving quality of information and evidence over time.

MONITORING POINT 2: Rather than “M&E,” it should be “M for E.”

- Design monitoring approach around key strategic and management questions.
- Articulate evaluation questions first, then determine what data/info are needed to answer them.
- The traditional approach of:

defining goals and objectives,

defining indicators for each goal/objective,

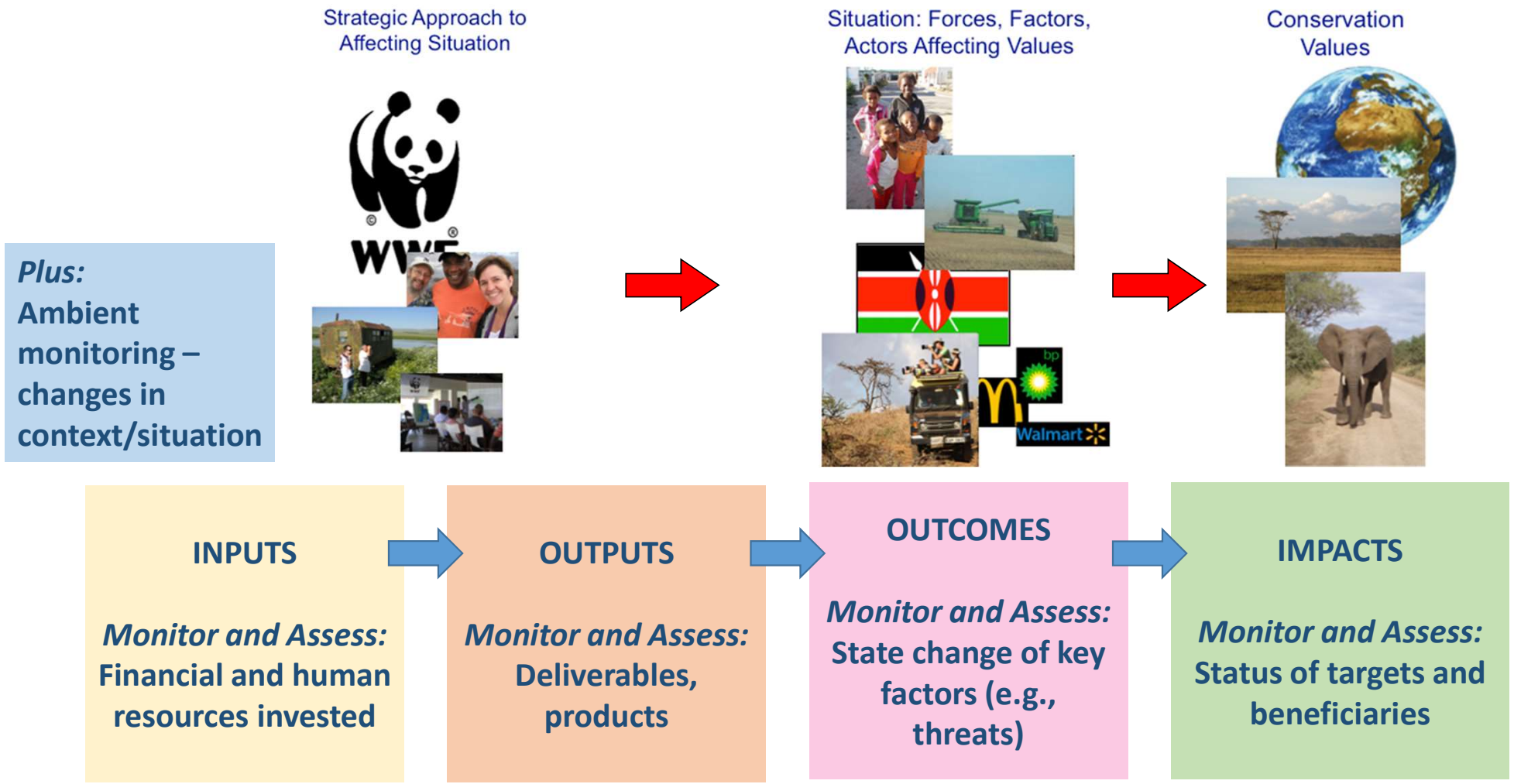
defining data needs by indicator,

collecting data by indicator...etc.

will be *insufficient* to answer key strategic and management questions and will result in collecting data that won't be used.

- *Quiz: Which? Design, Effectiveness, Impact, Efficiency, Sustainability*

What to monitor and assess? In terms of the generic results chain



MONITORING POINT 3: If you don't know where you've come from, you won't know how far you've gotten.

- Collect and document baseline at the start of the program.
- Again: collect and document baseline at the start of the program – qualitative if that's all you can do.
- Rather than assessing what's been done toward a goal or objective (i.e., activities), gather and use data to assess progress on outcomes/goals *and whether that's good enough*.
- In other words, funders and implementers should stop requesting/ accepting/ doing activity-based reporting. This only serves accountability.
- Use reporting as evaluative opportunity (*WHAT did we do/spend? SO WHAT did we achieve of what we planned (esp. against goals/objectives)? NOW WHAT can we do better?*)

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Why? Evaluation for accountability, improved impact, learning. Primary audiences should decide purpose (and main audience should be program first).
- What? Define evaluation questions – what do you want/need to know?
- How? On your own to EIE (if EIE, still participate to get the most out of it)
- How? *Design monitoring based upon data needs to answer evaluative questions (including baseline); don't collect data not needed to answer key questions.*
- When? Build into program design at start, schedule it, do it.
- Iterate – More important to go “full cycle” than develop world's best M&E plan that isn't utilized
- *Note: WWF Evaluation Guidelines probably best reference.*

THANK YOU!

Elizabeth O'Neill

elioneill@gmail.com

Skype: Elioneill in Boulder, CO, USA

+1-202-445-0490