

Paper for the GIZ conference “Systemic Approaches to Evaluation”:

**Integrating Systemic Thinking into Evaluation Practice:
A Case Study from South Africa**

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Integrating Systemic Thinking into Evaluation Practice: A Case Study from South Africa

Evaluation of the Peace Building Programme of Sinani-KwaZulu-Natal Programme for Survivors of Violence

In the following I will present crucial components of an evaluation design based on systemic thinking which was developed for the evaluation of the peace building programme of the South African organization Sinani-KwaZulu-Natal Programme for Survivors of Violence.

Characteristics of Sinani's work and focus of the evaluation

Sinani is a non-governmental organization in KwaZulu Natal and works on request from community leadership and community based organisations to bolster locally appropriate interventions addressing peace, economic development, HIV prevention and support to people affected by HIV/Aids.

Together with community partners Sinani assesses local conflict dynamics and tries to draw on existing resources and traditional ways of addressing these problems, while introducing new learning and networking.

Sinani targets especially community structures that will be able to sustain the achievements of the community in the long run. The basic idea is that Sinani has more leverage by working with and through key community people.

Sinani further acknowledges the major problem cycles in the communities where poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS reinforce each other. Improvement on one of these issues can be destroyed again through insufficient progress in one of the others. Hence, Sinani intervenes in each community with its HIV/AIDS, peace building and poverty alleviation programmes.

The peace building programme has been developed with the continuous financial and conceptual support of Weltfriedensdienst (WFD). The WFD granted its support especially through the German Civil Peace Service (CPS) programme which is financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany (BMZ).

The method of the evaluation was developed by Stephanie Schell-Faucon and myself on behalf of the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support and by Professor Nhlanhla Mkhize from the University of Kwa Zulu Natal.

Why did we integrate systemic thinking into the evaluation design?

One of the questions I was asked to focus on in my presentation was: Why did you decide to use a systemic approach? At this point I must say that I prefer to speak of the integration of systemic thinking and systemic components in the evaluation method, because a purely systemic approach to evaluation does not exist. The way I understand “a systemic approach to evaluation” is to build on best practice in the field and to enrich it, where needed, with systemic tools from the field of organisational development or family therapy.

This is even more true as some of the approaches, like action research or participative inquiry, are very close to systemic ideas and sometimes differences between them can hardly be seen. Therefore, it will be emphasised that systemic ideas can and must be combined with other methods.

For this reason, our approach was based on a combination of participative inquiry, action research and systemic methods. Systemic ideas were deemed to fit very well to African cultural meaning systems and the way Sinani thinks and works.

African cultural meaning systems and systemic thinking

It is one of the basic principles of several African cultures to believe that webs of relationships exist between organisms and objects.

These objects are seen as dependent of each other; they interact and influence each other. Additionally, even personhood is defined through relationships. One of the well known concepts in this regard is the idea of ubuntu ‘I am because we are and we are because I am’.

Whereas ‘western’ psychological concepts regard the self as an autonomous entity, African psychology sees the personality as context based. It is defined in terms of its relationships with the family, community or status or position within a group.

These considerations have to be taken into account when trying to understand and evaluate the work of Sinani in the African communities of KwaZulu-Natal, as its approach to peacebuilding is based on this understanding of human beings and their relationships.

Basic characteristics of African cultural meaning systems are very close to a systemic manner of looking at social relationships. Crucial components of systemic thinking are as well:

- thinking in terms of relationships and network structures
- focusing on patterns of interaction
- a circular and reciprocal understanding of social relationships, shaped by ambivalence and contingency

Therefore, it was agreed to include systemic thinking and systemic tools in the evaluation process. An evaluation design based on a linear and monocausal if-then logic, which tries to measure the results of Sinani's work, would not have been appropriate in this context.

Methodological approach of the evaluation

One of the challenges of this evaluation was that we had very 'conventional' questions to answer, but, at the same time, a systemic design of the evaluation was requested.

Following the OECD guidelines, amongst others, the following questions and issues should be addressed:

1. How effective and efficient is Sinani's peacebuilding work? What are its outcomes and impacts?
2. On Sinani's approach / model: What proved to be useful?
3. Is peacebuilding in KZN / South Africa still necessary in the future?
4. On the instrument of Civil Peace Service funding and approach: strengths and weaknesses in the example of Sinani and South Africa?

Joint preparation of the whole process, concretization of question together with Sinani staff:

We organized various exchanges and discussions among the evaluation team as well as among and with the Sinani staff on each party's particular expectations and ideas of the evaluation process, its main focus and methodological design. In addition, we developed together with the Sinani staff guiding questions as crucial issues for the whole process, such as:

1. How does change come about/ what brings peace: What are Sinani's theoretical assumptions and what are the implicit theories of change?
2. The relationship between traditional leaders/structures and municipal structures/ elected political leaders: What angle works best in terms of Sinani's approach and what is the impact of this relationship on the community?
3. Question of sustainability of the work of Sinani in the communities: When is the right moment for terminating an intervention and how to phase out?

At the beginning of the process it was crucial for us to develop a common understanding of the indicators of success for the evaluation process between all entities involved, especially the WFD, the three members of the evaluation team and the Sinani staff and - to a limited extent - also between Sinani and its partners and beneficiaries who were to be involved in this process.

Development of the evaluation design: Combining participative inquiry and systemic action research

In our understanding, the most important role of an evaluator is to bring people from different parts of the system together, connect issues that arise in different parts of the system, help to identify key questions may be also supportive to set up conversations that otherwise would not happen.

Hence, it is one of the main intentions of an evaluation based on systemic thinking to reveal the core dynamics in a system and try to generate insights and improving a joint understanding of crucial issues across a broad range of stakeholders. In contrast to this, non-systemic evaluation methodologies are quite often understood as “real time feed back” to decision makers, who can set change in motion.

A crucial component of the evaluation methodology was the use of discussion rounds and workshops to collect information and to feed this information back into the system at the same time. In addition to this, we used systemic methods to generate new insights on familiar knowledge and to enhance information exchange within the various subsystems. (circular questioning, feedback loop mapping, tetralemma)

It was only through interaction with the various “Sinani systems” that we developed issues to be focussed on during the workshops and questions to be asked during our field visits.

We organised two workshops and many discussion rounds during our stay in South Africa.

- The aim of the workshops was twofold: Firstly, it was meant to allow Sinani and the evaluation team to learn more about the perception of Sinani’s work and the changes people felt have been achieved or not yet achieved within their communities. Secondly, by bringing together representatives of different communities who rarely ever met, we wished to facilitate deeper reflection and learning from each other.
- The basic idea was that the workshop itself is an intervention with opportunities for learning and further change processes to be triggered.
- The participants were invited as “experts” that can share their local knowledge of the current situation and their experiences with the Sinani peace building programme and its impacts in the community over the years.
- The first workshop was organized as a “Café Conversation” to guarantee information exchange and to encourage everyone’s contribution to the discussion. A second one was organized as an open space.

Following systemic principles, the evaluation was designed as a cyclic and organic process of action and reflection in which the evaluation team and the “client system” mutually influenced each other and learned from each other.

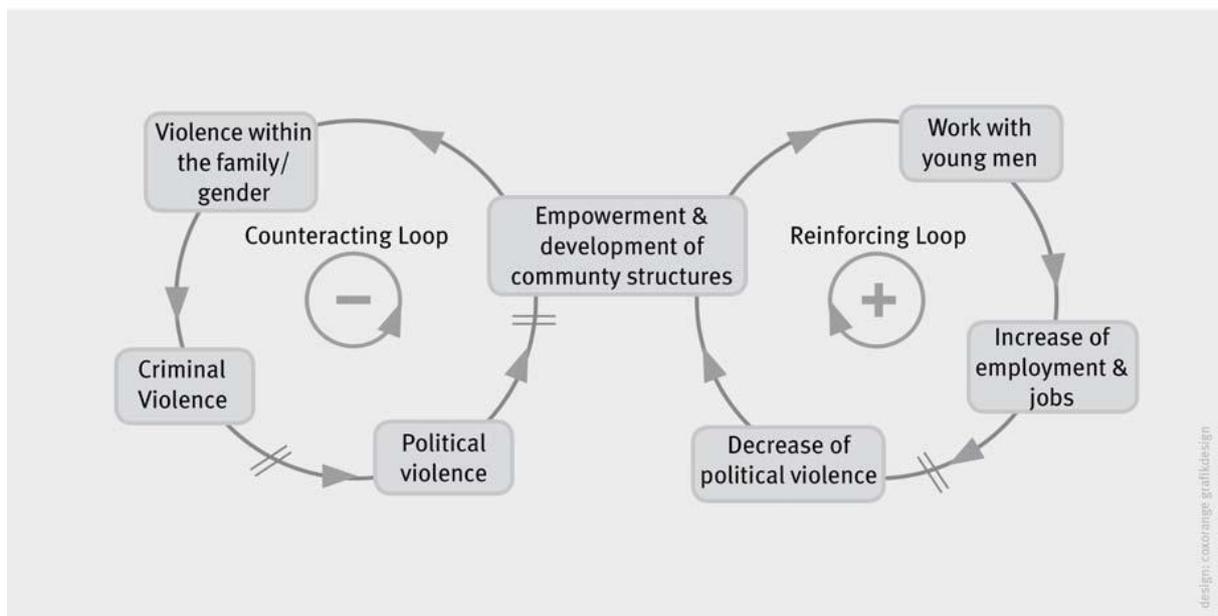
The evaluation process can be regarded as a circular joint learning exercise and intervention with the essential aim to increase the capacity of the organization to understand its strengths and weaknesses and develop ideas for future direction.

Reflection phases and feedback loops were integrated at different points of the evaluation to discuss with the Sinani team how the presence of the evaluation team influenced the system and how it changed or disturbed the system through the intervention.

In addition to this, the methodological approach was based on the assumption that a change within the “Sinani system” can only to a limited extent be facilitated from the outside and that the system itself has all the necessary ingredients and resources for change. What will be learned is in the end determined by the organization itself.

The systemic assumption that social systems behave in a non-linear manner has some further methodological implications for an evaluation:

- a) By a joint mapping of feedback mechanisms of the system and its context the dynamics of the system to be evaluated can be visualized.
- b) By mapping the positive and negative feedback loops, which constitute particular situations, it can be shown how certain issues within the conflict system interact and influence each other.



c) To broaden a binary view on a conflict situation and to illustrate that A and B are not always connected by linear relationships, systemic methodologies from the field of family therapy are useful, e.g. the tetralemma

Strengths and weaknesses of integrating systemic thinking into evaluations

Process orientation and local ownership

One of the basic principles of an evaluation based on systemic thinking is its process orientation and openness and flexibility in its implementation. The evaluation is created as an iterative process which responds to new findings, requirements and issues. It is not the role of an evaluator to define the issues to be focused on from the outside.

This is easier said than done since such a circular understanding of the evaluation process means first of all that the “clients” can cope with recursive designs where only a basic outline can be defined from the start. This is a very critical point since an evaluation team gains its authority in most of the cases by showing expertise and offering detailed agendas which include an elaborated design of the workshops, questionnaires and interviews.

The legitimisation for the intervention of the evaluators is constructed by showing their knowledge and expertise on how to design the evaluation process. Therefore an open design might create some irritations at the beginning. Often the staff of the project to be evaluated is not used of being a crucial part in designing the framework for the whole process.

But: It is an added value of this methodology that it creates ownership within the process. An evaluation based on systemic thinking aims at producing learning at the levels of individuals, but also at the level of projects or programmes which go beyond proposing short-term solutions for particular problems and aim to contribute to future successful action in complex situations.

Evaluation and strategy design

From a systemic point of view, a process oriented strategy development, which combines conflict analysis with ongoing planning and monitoring and an adaptive project management are more important for a successful intervention than the concentration on the results of a single evaluation.

Sinani regularly conducts self assessments and inquiries about the impact of their work within the communities. This documents were very useful for our evaluation.

A focus of our work with Sinani was connecting the assessment of the peacebuilding activities with developing further Sinanis peacebuilding interventions in the communities and therefore linking assessment and strategy development in a close manner. Only if the evaluation is embedded in ongoing activities and only if it is designed as participatory as possible it can enhance learning processes and help to improve the work of the organisation.

Time factor

A challenge of an evaluation based on systemic thinking might be that it needs more time for preparation due to the participatory development of the research agenda and the recursive design.

The role of the local evaluator was crucial in this process because he assisted in adapting the evaluation design to the local context. However, it was not always easy to communicate across the globe for preparing the evaluation.