

Changing the Funder – Evaluator Dialogue to Recognize Complexity: From Firefighting to Systematic Action

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Conversation between evaluators and donors

- Needs to change because
- without the discussion, we can't build the designs.

Outcomes

- What will they be?
- How might they be connected?

Patterns of change (a few examples)

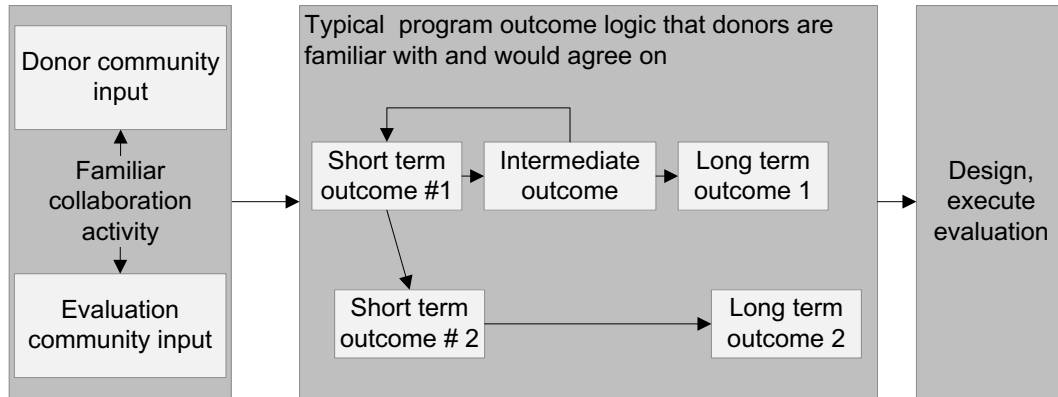
- Gradual change with major consequences
- Network effects
- Feedback loops
- Programs embedded in intricate activities and processes
- (Possibly) foreseeable and unforeseeable outcomes

Using models to maintain the conversation

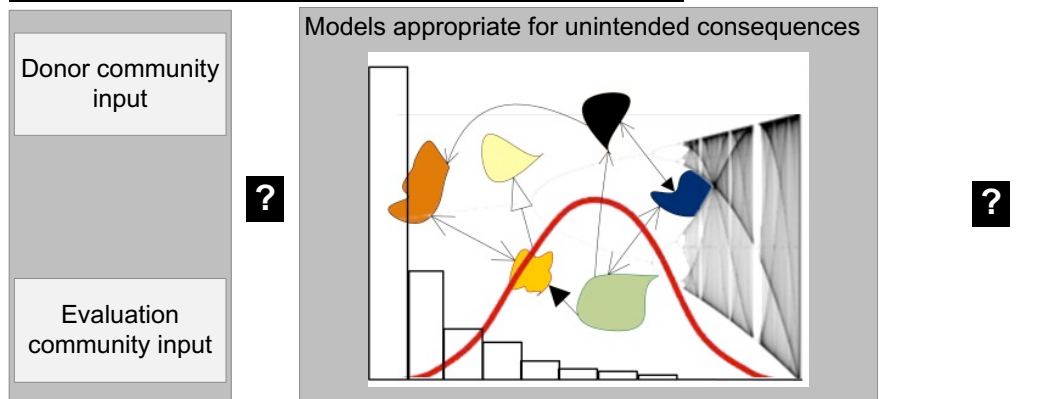
- Timing
- Process
- Participants

Research questions

We know how to have this kind of conversation



We do not know how to have this kind of conversation



Change can be driven by conflict between the dynamics of system behavior and the social/economic/political drivers of program design.

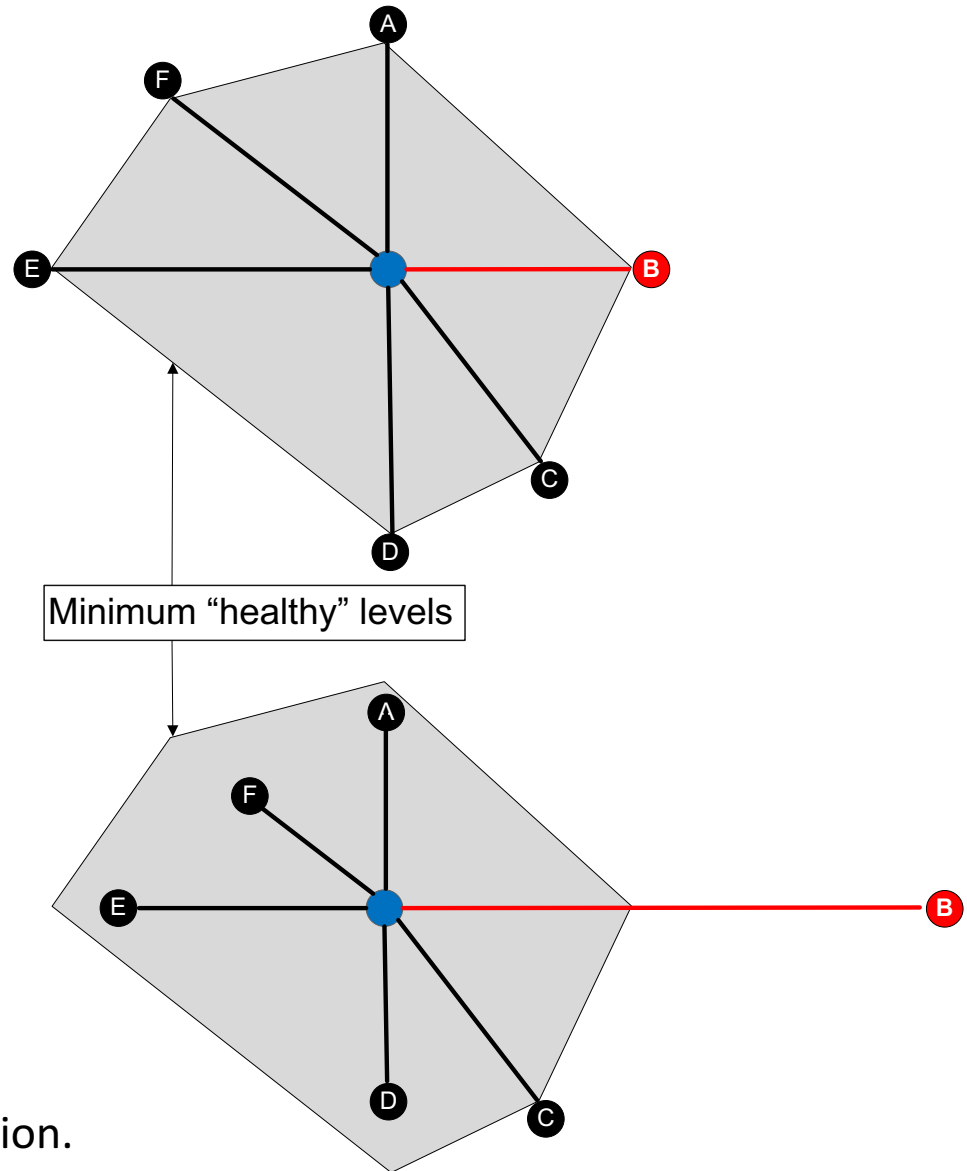
Because of missions, and funding streams, programs are committed to maximizing a single goal.

Long term viability requires what most programs *cannot* support.

Joint optimization of (reasonably) uncorrelated outcomes.

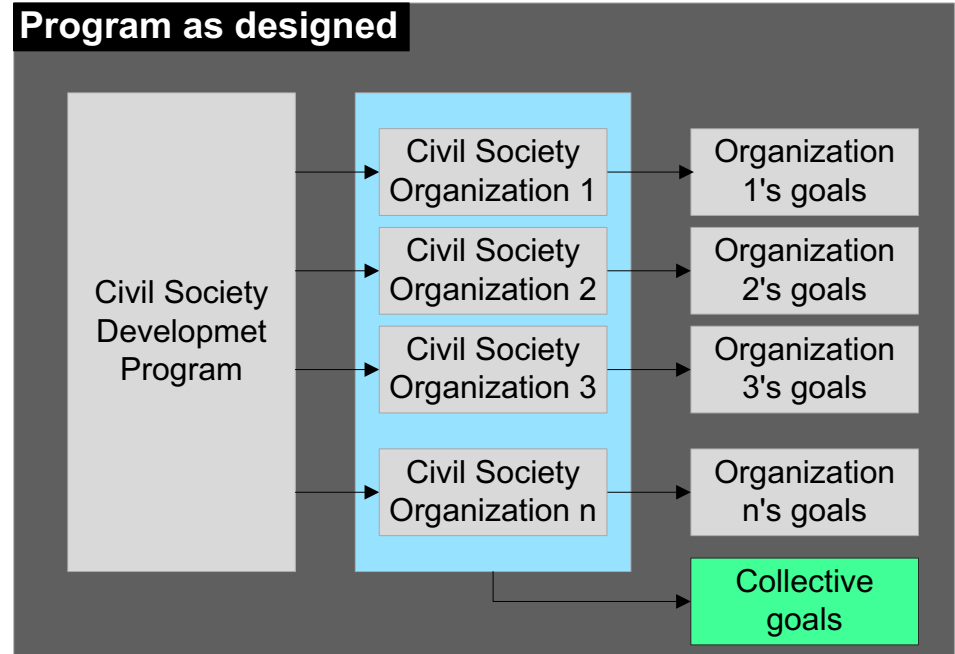
Eventually one goal will suffer.

Current thinking about outcomes does not recognize the importance of joint optimization.



Profound change can evolve gradually. Here is an illustrative example.

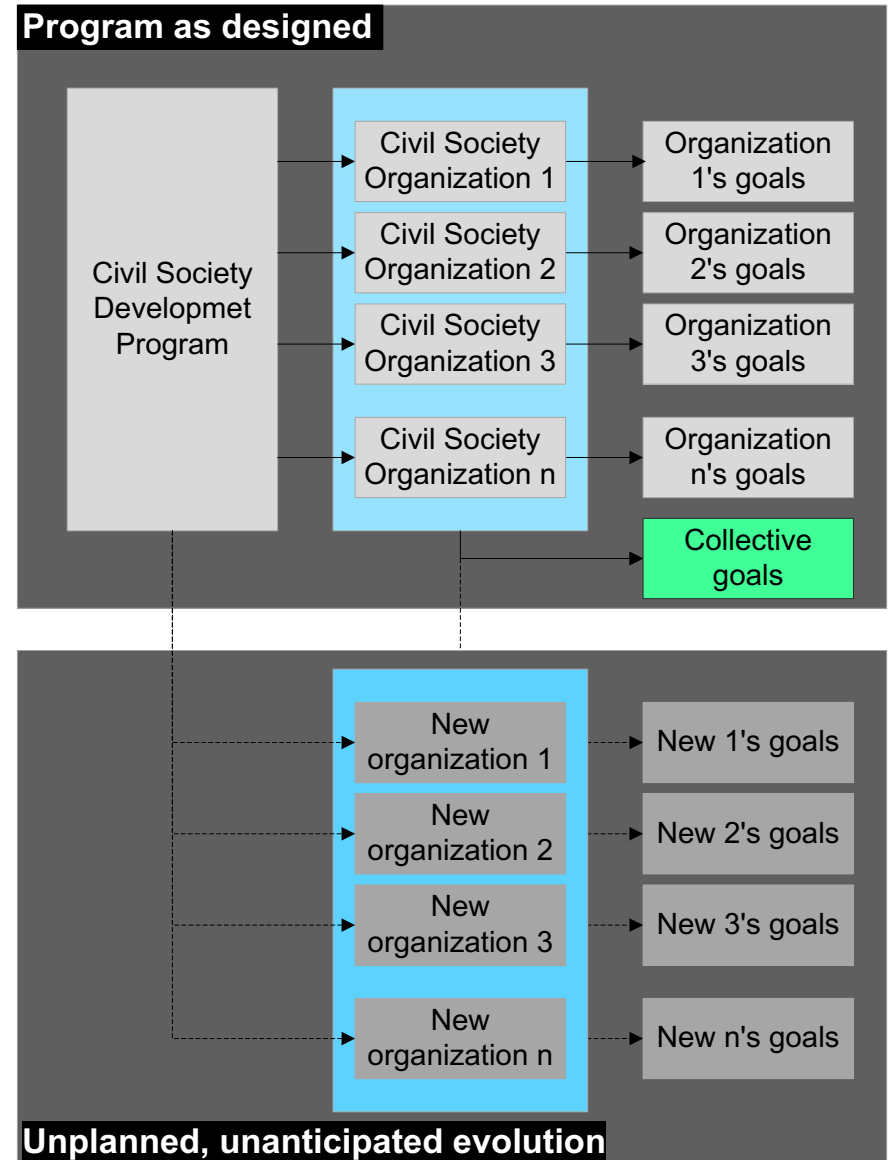
Program designed to support existing civil society organizations



Profound change can evolve gradually. Here is an illustrative example.

Program designed to support existing civil society organizations

- People notice the new program.
- A few small requests come in for help with a new organization.
- Program staff have some time on their hands.
- One thing leads to another.



Change can be sudden and discontinuous – Network effects Among Outcomes

Network behavior

- Begin with unconnected nodes.
- Randomly pick 2 and connect them.
- Measure total number of connected nodes.

It's easy to miss networks among outcomes.

Example

- Work with SMEs to improve operations (inventory control, business development, accounting).
- Expected outcomes = profitability, personal and community consequences of additional income.



Giant Component.nlogo

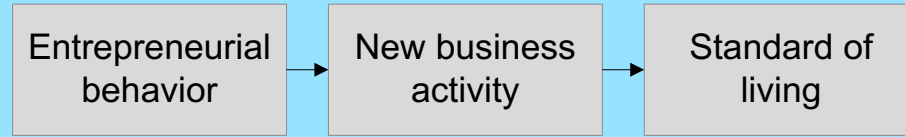
Expectations about outcome

Would funders expect or predict all the changes that might flow from more competent companies interacting with each other?

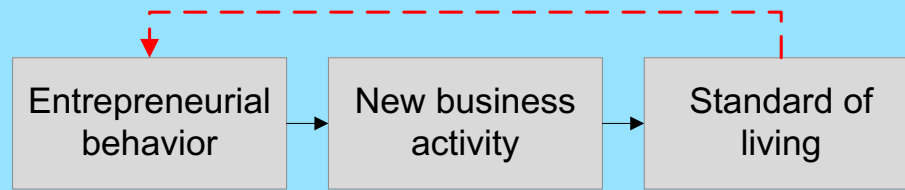
Change can be sudden and discontinuous – Feedback among outcomes

Do we really believe the program logic is this straightforward?

Three versions of an outcome chain for the same program

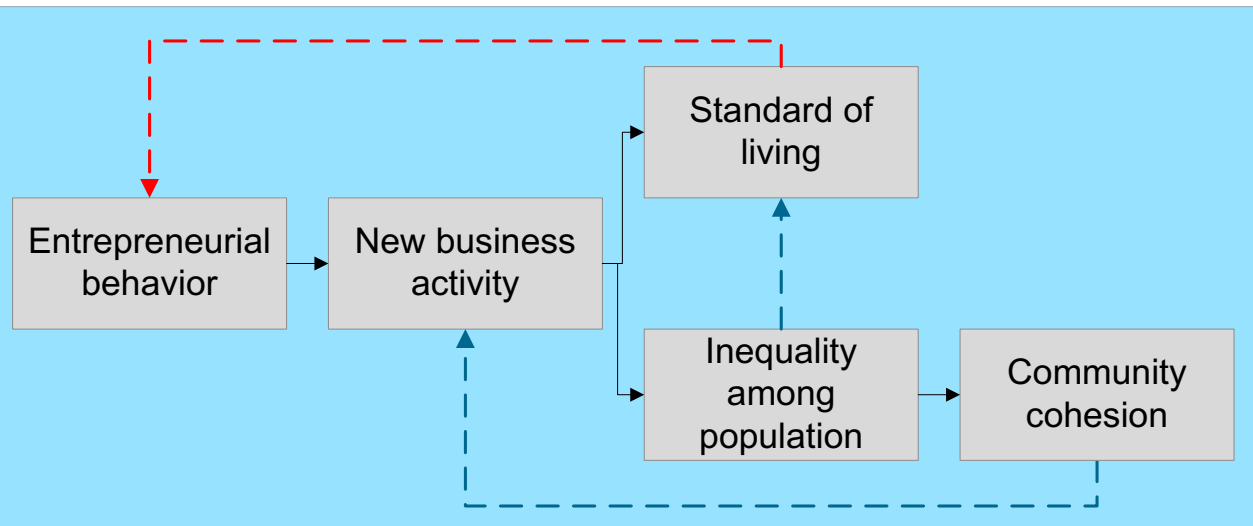


Even simple feedback loops can generate non-linear behavior



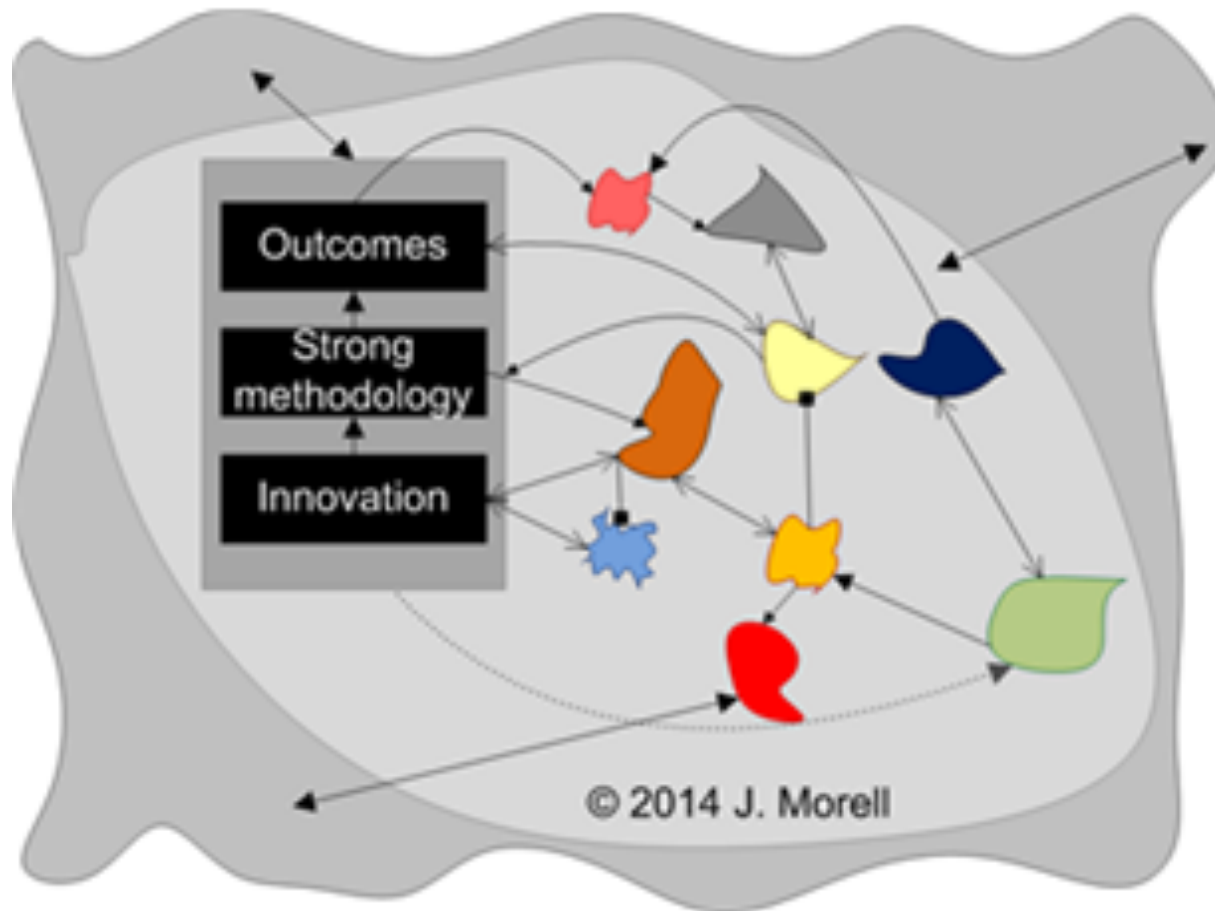
- Interacting feedback loops
- Different latencies
- Non-linear behavior

All of this is OK IF we can identify the feedback loops in advance



We live in a world where:

- Programs are embedded in rich settings.
- Feedback and network effects can result in sudden change.
- Multiple small changes can align to imperceptibly change a program's trajectory



It helps to think in terms of a continuum ranging from:

- We should have been able to anticipate it, to
- Complex behavior made the event impossible to predict.



Not new or surprising, just not done often enough

- Literature reviews,
- Diverse input into evaluation design
- People who have worked with similar programs
- Scrutiny of similar programs – service, setting, participants, etc.

Agile methodology

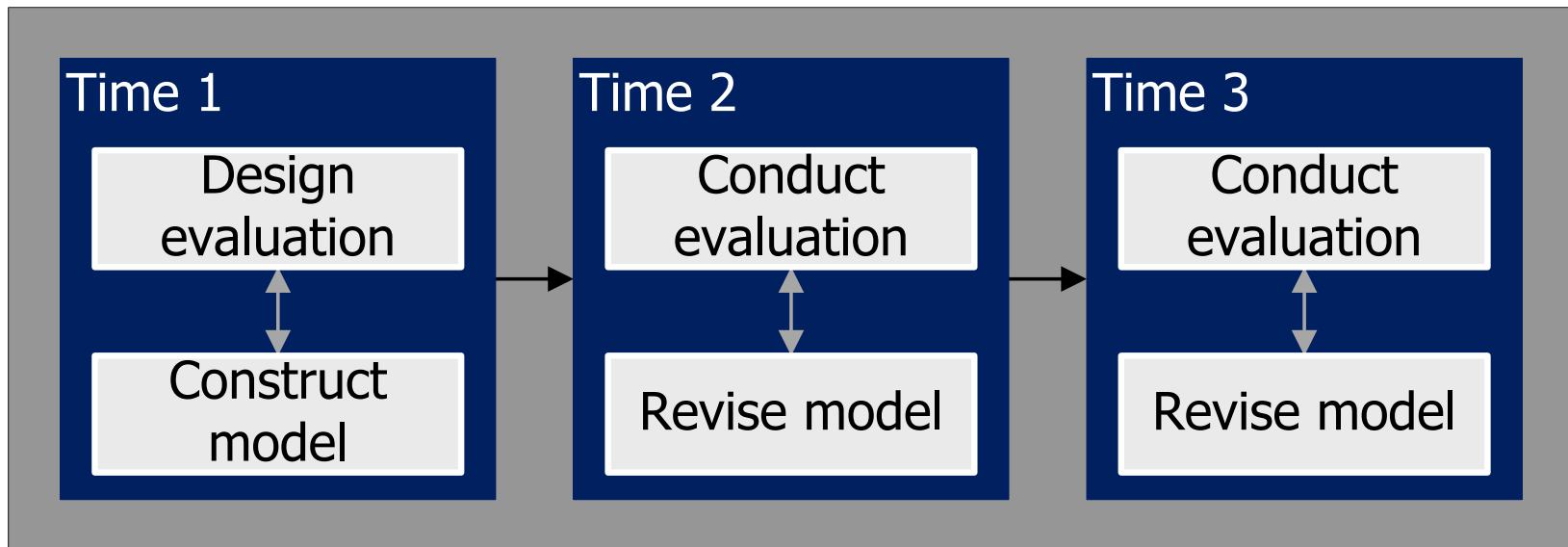
- Methodology
- Data
- Lots of design trade-offs

Models to structure the process

- Models to guide data collection
- Data to guide model revision
- Systematic over the evaluation life cycle

Elements of good use of models

- Choices for timing
- Group and 1:1 process
- Diversity of participants



Research Questions

Can evaluators do a better job of addressing unintended consequences if they continually iterate between model building and data collection over the course of an evaluation's life cycle?

Are there some conditions for which it is particularly worth the effort?

What is the best timing, e.g. calendar driven, event driven

What mix of points of view make for the most effective model building and re

How do evaluators respond to unintended consequences now? (Need to expand small amount of existing research.)

Books and Articles

Morell, J. A. (2005). Why are there unintended consequences of program action, and What Are the Implications for Doing Evaluation? *American Journal of Evaluation*, 26(4), 444 - 463.

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Morell, J. A. (2010). [Evaluation in the Face of Uncertainty: Anticipating Surprise and Responding to the Inevitable](#). New York: Guilford. http://www.guilford.com/cgi-bin/cartsript.cgi?page=pr/morell.htm&dir=research/res_eval&cart_id=946812.24050

Parunak, H. V. D., & Morell, J. A. (2014). [Emergent Consequences: Unexpected Behaviors in a Simple Model to Support Innovation Adoption, Planning, and Evaluation](#). Paper presented at the Social Computing, Behavioral-Cultural Modeling, and Prediction 7th International Conference, SBP 2014 , April 1-4, 2014, Washington, DC, USA.
http://jamorell.com/documents/SBP14EmergentConsequences_final.pdf

Morell, J.A. (2017) [From Firefighting to Systematic Action: Toward A Research Agenda for Better Evaluation of Unintended Consequences](#) Paper presented at Unintended Effects of International Cooperation: An Academic & Policy Cross-over Conference, January 16th and 17th 2017 The Hague, The Netherlands http://www.ru.nl/publish/pages/814787/morell_2017_10.pdf

Blog: [Surprises in Programs and their Evaluations](#) <http://evaluationuncertainty.com/>

Videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqRIJhqmy3ngSB1AF9ZKLg>