



## **Adapting for Success**

*An evaluation of the effectiveness of learning and adapting in  
the favelas of Rio de Janeiro*



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## Acknowledgements

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This research was conceptualized during a precursor study, which was also a collaboration between Kayla Boisvert and Theresa Williamson, with critical support from Ash Hartwell.

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## Executive Summary

**Developmental Evaluation (DE) is an evaluation approach that helps programs rapidly and systematically collect data on context, program processes, and program results in order to adapt interventions to more effectively work towards desired outcomes** (Patton, 2011). DE is an alternative to traditional evaluation approaches, which have been critiqued as problematic in complex development contexts that are rapidly and unpredictably changing, in that they force pre-planned interventions and measure success by how well projects achieve relative to pre-defined activities, outputs, and outcomes (e.g., Maclay, 2015).

DE is seen to be more appropriate to address complex development challenges because it allows for real-time collection of data and ongoing adaptation. While there are many guidance documents and case studies *describing* DE, as well as related approaches like Adaptive Management<sup>1</sup> (AM), there is little evidence to evaluate the claim that these approaches are in fact more effective. This study contributes to an emerging foundation of evidence for the effectiveness of DE and related approaches by evaluating the effectiveness of one NGO's approach to managing and evaluating developmentally and adaptively.

**Catalytic Communities (CatComm) is an NGO working since 2000 on behalf of Rio's favelas on issues such as sustainable development, human rights, and urban planning. Over the course of their 17-year history, CatComm has evolved their own customized approach to evaluating and managing, which has allowed them to respond to the needs and opportunities of favela communities.** In a precursor study (Boisvert, 2017), the lead researcher and the CatComm Director described CatComm's approach through the lens of *DE for Managing Adaptively*. While CatComm had not used the terms DE or AM to describe their approach before conducting the precursor study, our analysis revealed that their approach customizes most of the Principles of DE, as well as characteristics of AM, in a way that best meets their needs for learning and adapting. Therefore, we believe that examining the effectiveness of CatComm's approach provides useful evidence for the effectiveness of DE, AM, and related approaches.

In this study, the research team—which consisted of a lead consultant, three CatComm staff, a methodological consultant, and a “critical friend”—aimed to answer the primary research question, **“How has CatComm's approach contributed to their effectiveness?”** In this research, we focused on CatComm's Olympics Strategy, a series of activities carried out between 2009 and 2016 that aimed to leverage the international media presence in Rio to mitigate the violent human rights abuses that the government was perpetrating against favela residents.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Holling (cited in Allana, 2014, p. 4), Adaptive Management is “a structured, iterative process of robust decision making in the face of uncertainty, with an aim to reducing uncertainty over time via system monitoring.”

## CatComm and Pre-Olympic Rio de Janeiro

Between 2009 and 2016, in the name of Olympics-related construction and real estate speculation, the Rio de Janeiro city government was forcibly evicting favela residents from their homes and demolishing entire communities. Residents were receiving insufficient or no compensation for their homes; they were being relocated far away from their communities; and the government was using coercion, threats, and violence to remove people. At the same time, media coverage of the Olympics regularly neglected these human rights abuses, and residents had little recourse against these violations.

During this period, CatComm supported favela communities by educating community members about their rights and evictions resistance tactics, targeting story ideas to international journalists, and publishing their own articles on their news site, *RioOnWatch*. CatComm hypothesized that the right combination of community resistance, international press coverage, and increased positive and more nuanced understandings of favelas globally would pressure the Rio Mayor to use more humane tactics to prepare Rio for the Olympics. To carry out these activities, CatComm utilized a flexible, adaptive approach to management and evaluation. This approach was described in the precursor study (Boisvert, 2017) as the interaction between eight elements.

### **The Eight Elements of CatComm's Approach are:**

- (I) Clearly Defined Mission, Evolving Strategy;
- (II) Ongoing Situational Analysis and Contextualization;
- (III) Locally Led Initiatives;
- (IV) Multiple Points of Entry;
- (V) Culture of Experimentation;
- (VI) Network-based Approach;
- (VII) Ongoing, Real-time Data Collection; and
- (VIII) Continuous Reflection and Adaptation.

Each of the elements of CatComm's approach is essential, and, as explained in the precursor study, they are "*inter-related, cyclical, and reinforcing*" (Boisvert, 2017, p. 42).

To answer our research question, we used the Outcome Harvesting methodology to identify outcomes (defined as "*change[s] in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution*" [Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012]) that CatComm contributed to during the lead up to the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Using the Outcome Harvesting methodology, we harvested and triangulated outcomes, identified CatComm's activities that contributed to the outcomes, and identified elements of CatComm's approach that could plausibly be linked to the outcomes.

## *Outcomes and CatComm's Contribution*

The research team harvested **27 outcomes in 6 communities throughout Rio de Janeiro** that met our criteria. That is, the outcomes occurred during CatComm's 2009 to 2016 Olympics Strategy, can be plausibly linked to CatComm's activities, and can be plausibly linked to CatComm's developmental approach. We identified three types of outcomes, including:

- ***Changes in the behavior of government officials.*** Twelve outcomes involved government officials. In four outcomes, government officials stopped or reduced evictions, and in six outcomes officials offered better compensation to residents. In two outcomes, evictions increased but compensation for residents was improved.
- ***Changes in the behavior of media/journalists.*** Nine outcomes involved journalists. In four outcomes, journalists published material they would likely not have published otherwise, and in nine outcomes they published material that was more nuanced than it likely would have been without CatComm's support.
- ***Changes in the behavior of community residents.*** Six outcomes involved community residents. Two involved a change in discourse about evictions and the Olympics, three were related to hosting events to publicly discuss the Olympics, and one involved actively reaching out and requesting media coverage.

**All outcomes harvested were influenced by CatComm's pre-Olympic Strategy activities.** Three primary types of activities included:

- ***Providing support to media.*** Eighteen outcomes were influenced by CatComm's efforts to provide support to media. This included linking journalists to communities and providing linguistic and cultural translation, background information, and news stories.
- ***Documenting evictions processes.*** Nine outcomes were influenced by CatComm's documentation of evictions processes. Four were influenced by sharing on CatComm's own media outlets; three were influenced when CatComm contributed to major media reporting; and one was influenced simply by filming without sharing the footage.
- ***Providing support to residents.*** Seven outcomes were influenced by CatComm supporting residents. CatComm contributed to outcomes by engaging in informal dialogue with residents (two outcomes) and facilitating or supporting workshops and training (five outcomes) in order to provide information to residents about their rights and effective evictions resistance techniques.

In this study, we aimed to examine how CatComm's approach influenced their effectiveness. We found that **all of the 27 identified outcomes were influenced by CatComm's approach** to management and evaluation. Four major findings related to the influence of CatComm's approach include:

- **Each of the eight elements of CatComm's approach can be plausibly connected to the outcomes.** The number of outcomes directly influenced by each element varies, ranging from five to nineteen outcomes. Some elements (e.g., Data Collection; Reflection and Adaptation) influenced more outcomes than others (e.g., Experimentation; Ongoing Situational Analysis; and Clearly Defined Mission, Evolving Strategy). Two elements contributed to the greatest number of outcomes: Ongoing, Real-time Data Collection (Element VII) and Continuous Reflection and Adaptation (Element VIII). This provides further evidence to our claim that, *“Reflection and adaptation is the core element of [CatComm’s approach]. All of the other elements contribute to a culture in which CatComm can be flexible and responsive, and ultimately adapt their approach,”* (Boisvert, 2017, p. 41).
- Three of the elements of CatComm’s approach influenced the development of the broad Olympics Strategy, which contributed to the 27 outcomes. CatComm’s Olympics Strategy, which contributed to the outcomes harvested, represented a strategic shift (Element I) as a result of ongoing analysis of the situation (Element II), and it utilized multiple points of entry (Element IV) to address the problem. In other words, **all outcomes were influenced by these three elements by way of the development of the entire Olympics Strategy.**
- In addition to the influence of individual elements, **the interaction between elements also contributes to CatComm’s effectiveness.** There are many ways in which the elements of CatComm’s approach work together. For example, data collection (Element VII) and reflection and adaptation (VIII) require experimentation with new and creative ideas (Element V). Similarly, experimentation is not useful unless it is followed up with gathering information, reflecting on it, and adapting an activity or strategy.
- Finally, **the elements of CatComm’s approach and the relationship between the elements form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and it is this whole approach that together contributed to the 27 outcomes.** While the research team did not, and could not have, compared the entire approach to a more traditional approach, but rather isolated certain elements and relationships between elements to connect them to outcomes, it is plausible to conclude that because of the interdependent nature of the elements that it is the entire approach that contributed to the 27 outcomes, albeit in different ways for different outcomes.

### *Implications*

The findings of this study reveal a number of implications that may be of interest to development professionals, including funders, practitioners, evaluators, and researchers:

- **CatComm’s flexible, adaptive approach was effective in contributing to changes in the behavior of government, media, and community stakeholders during their 2009–2016 Olympics Strategy.** The 27 outcomes can be plausibly connected to CatComm’s activities, and then to CatComm’s approach to management and evaluation, and

therefore provide evidence of the effectiveness of CatComm’s approach. Both individual elements and the whole approach contributed to outcomes.

- **CatComm’s approach is customized.** CatComm’s approach embodies many aspects of DE and AM, and their approach emerged without having DE and AM as a model. CatComm’s experience confirmed that neither DE nor AM is a one-size-fits-all approach. The effectiveness of their approach highlights that application of such an approach requires customizing it to meet precise needs.
- **We will continue to evaluate and adapt the approach over time.** CatComm’s approach has evolved over their 17-year history as a result of ongoing experimentation, data collection, and adaptation. Given the complexity of the environment in which CatComm works, we will continue to question our assumptions, analyze the context, evaluate the effectiveness of the management and evaluation approach, in order to ensure that future iterations of the approach continue to be as effective.
- **CatComm’s approach is enabled by a deeply rooted trust in and from the communities they work with.** For CatComm, trusting relationships with communities was an essential enabling factor in implementing their approach, and therefore in their effectiveness.