

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciative Inquiry is a participatory form of inquiry. It puts a different focus on how information is collected, analysed and used, compared to traditional monitoring and evaluation methods. It deliberately focuses on what is working well, and how things could be made even better, rather than on problems and difficulties. It can be used to help plan, monitor and evaluate any kind of development intervention.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was first developed by David Cooperrider in the 1980s as an organisational change methodology. It has since gained a lot of popularity, perhaps peaking in the mid-2000s. Initially, it was mostly used by commercial organisations. However, it has since spread to organisations working in social development.

Appreciative Inquiry is a participatory form of inquiry that puts a different focus on how information is collected, analysed and used, compared to traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methods. It can be used to help design, plan, monitor and evaluate any kind of development intervention from a small project through to the work of an entire International NGO.

A key principle of Appreciative Inquiry is that the act of asking a question influences the direction of change. This is because the question (and the way in which it is asked) prompts those contributing information to anticipate a future state. Consequently, Appreciative Inquiry deliberately focuses attention on what is working well and how things could be made even better, instead of focusing on what is going wrong or needs to be fixed. It is often seen as an alternative to traditional forms of inquiry, which tend to focus on problems, challenges and difficulties. Appreciative Inquiry is designed to bring out the best in people and organisations, building on the successful and positive experiences of different stakeholders.

For many of its users Appreciative Inquiry is as much a philosophy as a set of tools and techniques. It includes an accompanying set of principles and assumptions, along with a number of core processes and practices (Coghlan et. al 2003). The philosophy can be described as follows:

Appreciative Inquiry “... is the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best. This approach to personal change and organization change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational. Appreciative Inquiry suggests that human organising and change, at its best, is a relational process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation.” (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003, p1)

Some of the different aspects of the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy are summarised in the box above.

The Appreciative Philosophy

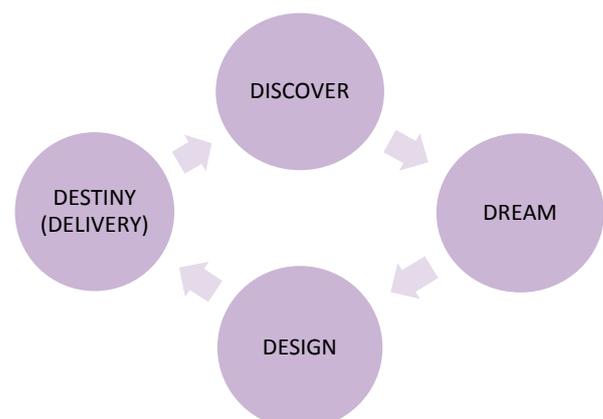
- What we focus on becomes our reality
- In every society, organization, or group, something works.
- Reality is created in the moment; there are multiple realities.
- The act of asking questions is an intervention.
- People are more confident about journeying to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- It is important to value differences.
- The language we use creates our reality.
- People are more motivated to act when they have a choice in what they will do.

Source: Preskill (2007)

Over the past two decades, CSOs have used Appreciative Inquiry for a range of purposes, including organisational development, strategic planning, network building, situational analysis, project or programme design, research, monitoring and evaluation. One of the reasons many CSOs like Appreciative Inquiry is that it is designed to support learning and improving – finding out what works, and why, in order to improve future performance.

How AI works

Within social development, Appreciative Inquiry is most often associated with the 4-D model. This model can be applied to any situation, and is summarised in the box below. It is important to note that the 4-D model is not a blueprint, and is designed to be applied differently in different circumstances.



Discover: In the discovery phase positive stories are identified and recorded, and then used to build a positive picture around a particular topic (such as organisational change or a development project). This involves identifying and appreciating processes that work well. The discovery phase is designed to shift attention away from what isn't working to what is working, and what may possibly work in the future. There are many methods that can be used to generate positive stories, including interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires. Appreciative Inquiry generally means asking questions in a positive way; for example asking stakeholders what they most value about themselves, their work and their organisation, or what achievement they are most proud of.

Dream: The dream phase encourages groups of stakeholders collaboratively to consider what they think their organisation, project, programme or partnership is being called upon to do. This phase is often conducted through a workshop or large group meeting, during which the stories collected in the previous phase are shared and discussed. In Appreciative Inquiry, stakeholders are encouraged to think outside the narrow boundaries of what an organisation, project or partnership is doing, or plans to do, and to imagine (or dream) what could be in the future instead.

Design: The design phase encourages stakeholders to come together to create a path towards achieving the dream. Stakeholders typically participate in putting together what are called 'provocative propositions'. These are ambitious objectives designed to challenge common assumptions or routines, and representing real possibilities for an organisation, project, programme or partnership. The provocative propositions are usually accompanied by the beginnings of strategies designed to help realise the objectives.

Destiny: This phase is sometimes known as the delivery phase. It focuses on action planning at organisational, project/programme and individual levels. Small groups are encouraged to work on areas that require collaboration, and teams may be established for new initiatives. Commitments are made to help ensure the agreed provocative propositions are realised. The required actions are aligned through the process, in order to generate a set of action plans designed to bring about the agreed objectives. The destiny phase is ultimately about putting learning into action in order to bring about desired change.

A common alternative to the 4-D model is the 4-I model developed by Encompass LLC – a small, women-owned consultancy firm based in the United States. It is like the 4-D model, but the phases are Inquire, Imagine, Innovate and Implement. The fourth phase in the 4-I model (implement) is designed to be a time of continuous learning, using appreciative M&E tools and processes to ensure regular learning that can be translated into improved performance (Catsambas 2015). The 4-I model helps take Appreciative Inquiry beyond design and planning, and towards a more continuous process throughout project or programme (or organisational) cycles.

The 4-I model has also been adapted for strategic planning, using the SOAR approach, which guides planners through a process of identifying Strengths and Opportunities, and developing Aspirations and expected Results (see Capela and Brooks Saunders, undated).

Appreciative Inquiry and M&E

Appreciative Inquiry is not primarily an M&E methodology, and has most often been used during design and planning. However, it has always incorporated an element of evaluation – assessing what is working well and seeking to improve performance – and in recent years there has been increased interest in integrating Appreciative Inquiry with M&E in general, and evaluation in particular (Roberts 2012).

One of the reasons for this is that Appreciative Inquiry can help ensure that evaluations are not just treated as accountability exercises – assessing change to report to external agencies such as donors – but instead are focused on learning and improving. Including Appreciative Inquiry processes within an evaluation is therefore seen as a way to ensure that evaluation is less judgemental and less threatening for many stakeholders.

The main influence of Appreciative Inquiry within evaluations is twofold. Firstly, it guides evaluation design, development and implementation as an overarching philosophy. Secondly, it influences the way in which data is collected and analysed (for example through ensuring that questions asked in interviews are phrased in appreciative language).

Appreciative Inquiry is considered as most useful within evaluation under one or more of the following conditions (see Coghlan et. al. 2004, Catsambas 2015, Preskill 2007):

- when an organisation is interested in using participatory or collaborative evaluation approaches;
- where there is a desire to build evaluation capacity at the same time as evaluating a project or programme;
- where the organisation, programme or project which is the focus of the evaluation values innovation and creative thought;
- where there is a clear desire to use evaluation findings to change plans and activities in the future;
- where different stakeholders feel threatened by an evaluation, or have had bad experiences in the past;
- where there is a hostile or volatile environment; or
- where relationships between different stakeholders are poor or have deteriorated.

Strengths and weaknesses of AI as an M&E approach

When applied to M&E, Appreciative inquiry has a number of strengths. It is a participatory approach, and therefore

includes all the opportunities (and challenges) offered by participatory M&E. It is very focused around learning in order to improve, and therefore ensures M&E goes beyond simple reporting for accountability purposes. And it can be used in situations and cultures where stakeholders are nervous about evaluations, and are therefore inclined to hide the truth. For example, the Civil Society Support Programme (CSSP) in Ethiopia, supported by INTRAC, used Appreciative Inquiry over several years to help monitor the programme. This proved very effective in a culture where M&E had previously been seen as both judgemental and punitive.

Some argue that Appreciative Inquiry is less useful for looking at negative changes, or processes that didn't work. Others disagree, saying that Appreciative Inquiry is better than other methodologies at getting stakeholders to talk about errors and failures within a supportive and appreciative environment. Some evaluators and CSO

managers claim to have had more success in getting CSO staff to be honest, engaged and realistic when working through Appreciative Inquiry than through traditional evaluation methods.

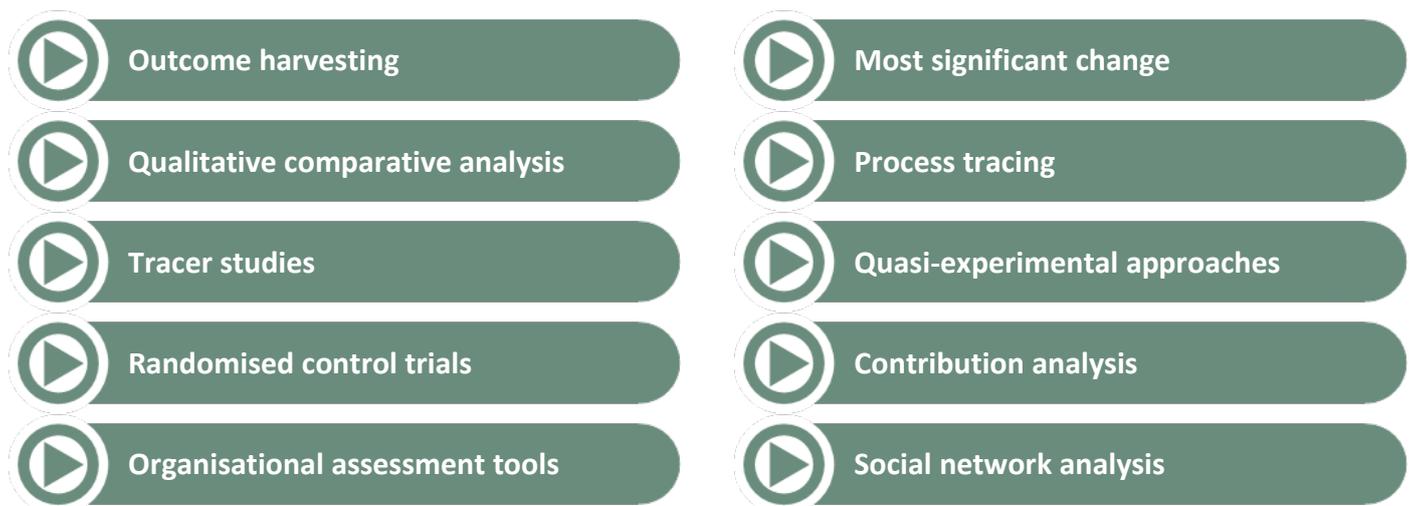
One limitation of Appreciative Inquiry (as an M&E approach) is that it does not automatically include processes to critically test claims made about change and causality. This contrasts with many other methodologies, such as process tracing, outcome harvesting and most significant change (MSC). It is therefore important when applying Appreciative Inquiry as an M&E approach to ensure that critical methods and processes are employed.

Finally, Appreciative Inquiry is based on an assumption that inquiry is the first step of a future process. Therefore, it is not appropriate to use Appreciative Inquiry for end-of-project evaluations where there is little or no chance of continued funding.

Further reading and resources

Three papers that may serve as an introduction to Appreciative Inquiry in an M&E context are those by Coghlan et. al. (2003), Catsambas (2015) and Preskill (2007), listed in the references section below.

Links to other papers in the M&E Universe dealing with complex methodologies for collecting and analysing information can be found below.



References

- Capela, S and Brooks-Saunders, A (undated). *A Different Approach to Strategic Planning: SOAR-Building strengths-based strategy*. HearthShare Human Services. Accessed on 1/5/16 at: http://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=6&ved=0ahUKEwj5t7qOn73MAhWEHsAKHa7FAIwQFghGMAU&url=http%3A%2F%2Fcoanet.org%2Fconference%2Fppt%2FA7Presentation.pdf&usg=AFQjCNGCLkzww5C1PpNQELhWXAQAEY_eTQ
- Catsambas, T (2015). *Reframing Evaluation Through Appreciative Inquiry*: Workshop presented at Claremont's evaluation Centre, Claremont, CA. August, 2015.
- Coghlan, A; Preskill, H and Catsambas, T (2003). *An Overview of Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation*, in H. Preskill & A. Coghlan (Eds.), *Appreciative inquiry and evaluation*. New Directions for Program Evaluation, 100, 5-22. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Preskill, H (2007). *Using Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation Practice*. PowerPoint presented at the AEA-CDC 2007 Summer Evaluation Institute, June 11-12, 2007, Atlanta, GA.
- Roberts, K (2012). *Appreciative Inquiry*. http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/appreciative_inquiry retrieved on August 15th, 2016 from the Better Evaluation website.
- Whitney, D and Trosten-Bloom, A (2003). *The power of Appreciative Inquiry*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Author(s):

INTRAC

Contributor(s):

Nigel Simister and Alix Tiernan

INTRAC is a not-for-profit organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of civil society organisations to be more effective in addressing poverty and inequality. Since 1992 INTRAC has provided specialist support in monitoring and evaluation, working with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs. We encourage appropriate and practical M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts.

M&E Training & Consultancy

INTRAC's team of M&E specialists offer consultancy and training in all aspects of M&E, from core skills development through to the design of complex M&E systems.

Email: info@intrac.org

Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851



M&E Universe

For more papers in the M&E Universe series click the home button