Social learning and evaluation

Evaluation itself can be a vehicle for social learning, thereby enhancing the evaluation process as well as leading to learning (Measham, 2008).

Social learning can be used to explore and analyse the change and adaptation process to highlight strengths and weaknesses in the design of a behaviour change and community adaptation project for complex problems.

In such complex situations, where there are multiple actors and actions, it is difficult to adequately demonstrate cause and effect through traditional evaluation processes.

Social learning recognises complexity and builds a shared understanding of the problem. A social learning approach tends to emphasise the learning or change process more than the achievement of an outcome.

By getting participants to collectively share evidence of 'what works' and lessons, it allows participants to learn together about the challenges and possible ways to address them.

Keen et al. (2005) propose five principle for fostering social learning through evaluation:
1- Repetition: social learning is an iterative process and by asking a core set of questions over time creates a process of reflection and allows a comparison of thinking over time
2- Feedback and discussion: a core component of participatory evaluation, and allows participants to situate their own understanding of a problem or issue within the broader context of the community, including understanding the range of individual positions within it. Discussion also allows interpretation of results in collaborative way.
3- Group deliberation: social learning inherently involves interation with others. Focus groups provide a means to encourage pariticpants to deliberate on key issues, such as the role of facilitators or what are the key elements needed to transition to more sustainable communities. This helps the group to realise that there are no silver bullets for complex problems.
4- Flexibility: learnings from the evaluation can be incorporated into the continual delivery of the project (adaptive management); also allows project staff to update the goals of the project based on delivery feedback
5- Integration: of different types of knowledge and evaluation

Measham (2008) presens a practical social learning framework for evaluation. Elements that you could consider for your project include:
Semi-structured interviews with questions repeatedly asked over time (before, during and post project) to identify constraints to change over time, or changes in learning
Focus groups to explore and reflect on particular aspects of a project
feedback workshops for stakeholders to reflect on how a project has influenced others, and what they in turn can learn from others experiences. The feedback also serves to confirm and clarify what works.