Summary of discussion points

From COVID-19 to climate change: transformational evaluations for global crises

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In association with IDEAS, SDG Transformations Forum and gLOCAL Evaluation Week.

In this time of deep international uncertainty around the consequences of COVID-19, it is essential to grab the golden opportunity to inspire systems change and the large scale transformation that is needed for societies and economies to tackle climate change while preventing a recurrence of crises like COVID-19.

This virtual dialogue brought more than 80 participants together from over 35 countries with representatives from evaluation, academia and government.

Key points

- COVID-19 can provide an opportunity for a climate smart recovery, a transformational change to 'build back transformative' aligned with a just transition. Societies need to undertake radical thinking in plans and designs of social, environmental and economic systems. The pandemic has provided the opportunity to see that what causes climate change in the longer run will also cause pandemics in the short run, and that not tackling these root causes will lead to future pandemics and other environmental disasters, and ultimately lead to climate change beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius.

- Transformation within the evaluation community focuses on a response to grand challenges and requires a collaborative effort. There is a need to shift away from narrow focused solution thinking and a call for radical change and revisioning human and natural systems. An approach that acknowledges the thinking through of power structures, and those which enable or resist change. There is a great need for evaluation to form closer connections with policy makers and communities and vice versa if evaluation is to truly have an impact.

- Supporting transformations involves multi-actor interventions with public and private sector involvement, as well as stakeholders from local, national and global levels, where appropriate. These interventions need to be focused on removing barriers to change as well as introducing innovations that will move social and economic systems in the right direction, including a shift towards sustainable interaction with the environment.

- Working with transformation requires different mindsets and practices. Evaluators may need to shift the focus away from linear theories of change and impact measurements towards the development of multiple dimension trajectories, recognising emerging patterns, and placing higher importance on the processes of design and implementation rather than the impacts only.

- The political nature of evaluation needs to be recognised and addressed. Evaluation that supports transformation has to reflect the values that underlie sustainable development and concepts such as regenerative economies and qualitative growth. There needs to be a shift in focus from impact measurement to supporting learning

for intervention and portfolio design and implementation, based on systems and complexity concepts as well as some understanding of societal values and dispositions to change and resilience.

- Evaluation often reflects and reproduces the colonial patterns and unequal power relations of society; without care it can be gender, age and ethnicity biased. Evaluators have the potential to make a difference if they remove silos and prejudices. Joint action with a clear purpose, that challenges traditional evaluation paradigms, culture and ways of doing things is needed. The action needs to hold everyone accountable and focus on generating transformative sustainable change. Transparency and accountability are needed now more than ever.

- Indigenous perspectives are a wealth of knowledge which can help evaluators find their role in restoring complexity and connectedness to dynamic systems and start the journey towards rebuilding sustainable systems. Evaluators need to engage in this knowledge to do better.

COVID-19 to climate change

1. COVID-19 and climate change are generating ongoing transformations. Both the pandemic and climate emergency have the same root causes of humanity's unsustainable interaction with the environment.

2. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights how badly prepared society was for this, despite warning signs. It has emphasised the deep inequalities and widening gaps between income, gender, race, and access to technology. COVID-19 does not discriminate; it knows no borders, gender or race.

3. The pandemic has highlighted the differences in responses that governments and political systems have taken. Synergies and lessons can be drawn with this in the response to the climate emergency.

4. To tackle climate change, going forward, there is a need to ensure taxpayers money is not subsidising fossil fuel industries that have been proven unsustainable during the pandemic. A focus on creating new industries and jobs which are more sustainable and climate friendly is needed.

5. The pandemic should be used as a catalyst of change ahead of COP 26 in November 2021. Countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and stimulus packages should be revised. Countries need to take this opportunity to move towards a greener more sustainable future. Evaluators need to strengthen their ties with governments to see how they can use their expertise to support this transformation.

The need to evaluate the transformation of systems

6. Evaluation can inform ongoing transformations and their aftermath, such as COVID-19, or inform initiatives aimed at sparking or shaping transformations.

7. There is a real responsibility of evaluators to reflect on the link between society, nature and the economy, and to move the focus of evaluations away from only looking at what has happened, and instead concentrate on what can be learnt from the past to enable better pathways to change to be built.

8. Within the evaluation community there is a need to shift away from narrow drawn focused solution thinking and a call for radical change and re-envisioning human and natural systems.

9. An approach is also called for that acknowledges the thinking through of power structures, those which enable or resist change.

10. Future-ready value systems reflected in concepts such as regenerative economics, qualitative growth and an ecological civilisation demand new emphasis in evaluation questions and criteria.

The need to transform evaluation to better tackle problems

11. To be transformative and to support transformation, evaluation practice needs to be transformed.

12. Evaluators tend to look for evidence in the past, but they need to start looking into evidence (scenario's, risk assessments) regarding the future. They need to increase their depth of focus to really understand what is going on instead of rushing into what works.

13. There is a need for a better relationship between evaluation, learning and accountability. Evaluation is not about finding fixes, but rather it is about experimenting, succeeding or failing, learning and adapting.

14. Working with transformation requires different mindsets and practices. There is a need to shift the focus away from linear theories of change, impact measurement, results-based management, rigid plans and control, towards assessing intervention and portfolio design and implementation based on systems and complexity concepts, and some understanding of societal dispositions to change and resilience. In effect this would involve the analysis of dynamical systems change processes and patterns, and development trajectories that need to progress along multiple dimensions.

15. A more intense focus by evaluators on what they identify as the influences on systems is called for, such as highlighting incentives, power relations and societies' dispositions.

16. Significant materials that can inform evaluation in the context of transformation are already available, with Blue Marble Evaluation the furthest developed. (https://bluemarbleeval.org/)

17. The current protests in the US highlight the unsustainability of the current social system which has been constructed on deep seeded inequalities built over years. A deeper look into power as a result of colonialisation and the impact this has on culture, knowledge systems and labour, is needed. Evaluators can contribute more by reviewing intellectual landscapes and power relations focusing on 'root' or 'deep' causes rather than symptoms. This requires systems thinking that does more than scrape the surface

18. Evaluators need to accommodate with respect and dignity both Global South and North narratives about transformational change and its evaluation.

19. Indigenous people have a wealth of knowledge and methods from which evaluators can learn. For example, the Māori people in New Zealand have led the development of evaluation frameworks which recognise the interconnections between society and the natural world and put emphasis on reciprocity and self-determination.

20. Current evaluation practices are based on a polite acknowledgement of indigenous knowledge rather than true engagement. Words such as culture and indigenous are often included but are not fully seen in the evaluation. Evaluators need to go beyond this and truly engage.

The need to advocate for change

21. Evaluators need to acknowledge that they are not neutral and be aware of this. They need to reflect on their practice and recognise themselves as change actors. Any change takes a champion. Strong evaluation leaders who are able and willing to stand up and challenge the status quo on reversing power dynamics in the system are needed.

22. Gaps in the literature, curricula and courses need to be addressed in order to develop capacities for transformation and for the evaluation in support of transformation.

23. Positive steps are being taken for more transformative ways of thinking; however,

there is still considerable resistance in the form of the defensive nature of institutions and their low risk tolerance.

24. Evaluative practices need to engage better with transformational change. Evaluation is a dynamic and innovative field which is capable of adapting. There is a need to explore the various ways in which systems analysis and complexity can be introduced in evaluation practice and brought to bear on specific efforts to catalyse transformational change.

Lessons from crises

25. Lessons from the current COVID-19 crisis are being learned and shared.

26. A clear transition from crisis response to recovery is necessary.

27. There are warnings that the misuse of authority, corruption and limited transparency and accountability pose a threat to society during times of uncertainty.

28. Many lessons were learnt from the 2004 tsunami. The evaluation community recognised they made mistakes in their evaluations of the response which they can learn from. For example, one of the biggest lessons was the need for evaluators to be linked with policy makers and the community, which was missing after the tsunami. There is a need to be more real time and more involved to break open the space for discussion.

Conclusion

COVID-19 provides an opportunity for societies to take transformative action that will address the root causes of this and future pandemics and climate change. The rapid changes in behaviour of society in response to the pandemic provide vital lessons which can aid in the response to the climate emergency. It highlights the opportunity for all actors to think and act radically to develop sustainably in a just and inclusive manner – and with the needed urgency.

Evaluators have a key role to play in this transition, as evaluative practice can help accelerate progress towards transformation. They need to acknowledge current biases and capacity shortcomings, and stand up to outdated thinking, questioning current ways of working to really understand what works, how and why it works, for whom and under what circumstances. A more inclusive approach is needed to really understand and respect the communities and societies in which they work, as well as closer and stronger engagement with the policy makers and other influential actors who can bring about sustainable transformative change. This is a call to action for all interested and involved, each in their own space and as a collective.

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