



## EVALSDGs INSIGHT # 17: Evaluation and the Transformational Imperative

**PURPOSE:** Formidable challenges threaten life on this planet and the humanity it sustains, calling for rapid systems transformation at a global scale. This call is reflected in the title of the 2015 United Nations General Assembly Resolution introducing the 17 interlinked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. The pathway towards implementing this ambitious 2030 Agenda requires a radical overhaul of the “business-as-usual” approach to development if the future of the planet and humanity is to be secured. How can evaluation, a profession in the business of assessing and problem solving, inform and support the transformational imperative? In this EVALSDGs Insight, we look at why and how evaluation needs to transform itself if it is to better support the transformational agenda mirrored in the SDGs and summarize some promising pathways for this transformational journey.

### THE ISSUE:

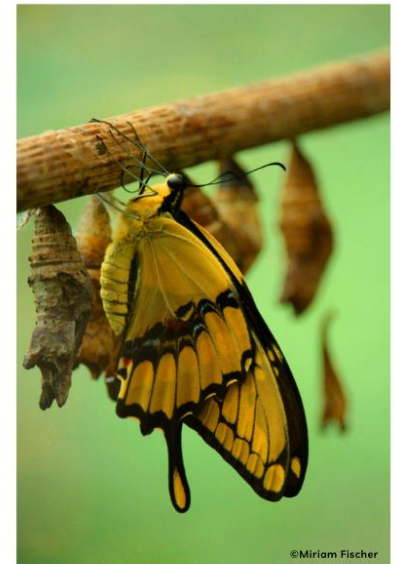
#### What is Transformational Change?

Transformational change refers to, “a deep and fundamental change in a system’s form, function or process,” (TCLP, 2021). Transformational changes fundamentally alter political, social, economic, ecological, and technological systems into new structures, systems, processes, and norms.

Transformational change can be positive or negative, and this can change over time and for different stakeholder groups. An instructive example of a negative ecological transformational change triggering a positive social transformational change is the depletion of the Ozone Hole over the South Pole, identified in the mid-1980s and prompting the landmark Montreal Protocol to regulate the production and consumption of nearly 100 man-made ozone depleting substances (ODS). Ratified by every country on Earth, the Protocol has gone beyond policy into action and transformational change, phasing out 98% of the ODS to reduce the size of the ozone hole

to the smallest on record, and saving an estimated two million people annually from skin cancer (UNEP, 2019).

In summary, transformational change can take many shapes and forms, but shared features are that it is systemic and significant. In other words, when transformational change occurs, people know it - like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly. Hence, transformational change is often contrasted with partial or incremental change.



#### Transformational evaluation and its rise

So, what does the transformational agenda mean for evaluation? “Transformational Evaluation” is not a new prescribed methodological approach, such as Developmental Evaluation or Realist Evaluation. Instead, we use transformational evaluation to refer to evaluation that supports transformational learning and change.<sup>1</sup>

Three interrelated drivers can be identified that have fueled the increasing attention on transformation in evaluation (Chaplowe & Hejnowicz, 2021):

1. **Urgency of the Anthropocene.** The Anthropocene era is marked by rapid environmental and social breakdown, which has significant impacts on Earth’s ecosystem and the life it sustains. Examples of the global emergency are all around us and mirrored in the SDGs identified to address the myriad of

conducting research and evaluation in a way that contributes to social justice.

<sup>1</sup> Distinguished from *transformative evaluation*, an established theoretical framework developed by Donna Mertens (2009) for

challenges we confront, from global warming, pollution, and biodiversity loss to the heightened levels of inequality, racial injustice, dark money in politics, misinformation, polarization, violence and war, and climate-related mass migration. This urgency has driven heightened attention in sustainable development and hence evaluation to transform the complex and interconnected nature of these global challenges.

2. **Uptake of complexity theory and systems thinking.** The global challenges manifest as complex (wicked) problems which are characterized by multiple interacting systems, levels of change (e.g., local, regional, and global), and intersecting interventions and actors. The rise of complex systems analysis in evaluation has been pronounced in the past two decades, (e.g., [Bamberger et. al., 2016](#), [Patton, 2011](#), [Williams, 2010](#)), providing a heuristic and suite of tools for navigating such complexity, stressing that interventions occur in a broader context that requires understanding interrelationships, engaging with multiple perspectives, and reflecting on where boundaries are drawn in terms of those interrelationships and perspectives.
3. **The evaluation market.** Evaluation is embedded in the political economy and, as such, is influenced by the same market forces that shape the evaluand. In response to the increasing attention on transformational change and the systemic interdependencies embodied in the SDGs, the demand to evaluate interventions targeting transformational change is increasing. However, in order for evaluation to contribute to understanding transformational change, the evaluation market itself will need to transform to support evaluation's transformational potential. We take a brief look at what needs to be transformed in evaluation in our next section.

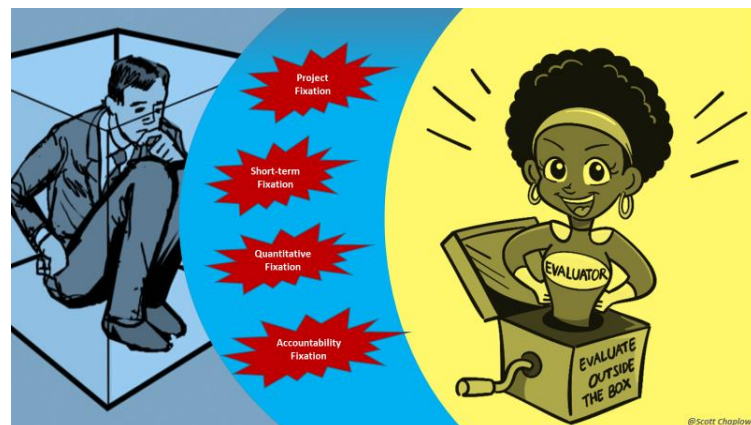
### Barriers to evaluation's transformational potential

Contrasting the above drivers for the transformational agenda in evaluation are some barriers or boxes that confine evaluation's transformational potential ([Chaplowe & Hejnowicz, 2021](#)). As with the drivers summarized above, these barriers are interrelated and will vary according to context.

1. **Project fixation.** Evaluation has historically been applied to clearly defined projects and programs provided by single agencies and funded individual donors. These interventions are typically treated as closed boxes, using conceptual models such as

logical frameworks and theories of change to identify predetermined results and linear causal linkages that are used to assess performance and achievement of desired results. However, this narrow focus draws attention from nonlinearity, unanticipated consequences, and potential unplanned emergent learning. A fixation on predetermined, linear models often leads to reductionist planning and analysis that reinforces siloed rather than the systems thinking that is a hallmark of transformational work.

2. **Temporal fixation.** Interventions are often designed around given timelines dictated by funding and reporting cycles. However, complex systems and transformational changes do not behave according to planned timeframes. There are a host of emergent, intervening factors that can affect the intended intervention logic, ranging from economic recession and political change/unrest to natural disasters and pandemics. Evaluation needs to be more iterative and ongoing before (ex-ante), during (formative), and after (summative and ex-post) interventions rather than confined to temporally eventual exercises, such as the conventional recipe of a baseline study, midterm review, and final evaluation. Ongoing, iterative **monitoring as evaluation** is more responsive to complex operating environments we confront today, supporting emergent transformative learning, strategy testing, and course correction for adaptive management.



3. **Quantitative fixation.** Quantitative measurement has enormous value and contribution to evaluation, but a "tyranny of metrics" ([Muller, 2018](#)) reflects an over-reliance on quantitative measurement of pre-determined, measurable goals that can burden interventions and distract from transformational learning opportunities. Reality is not a binary concept that can be counted, nor wrapped up into neat, quantitative boxes with key performance indicators (KPIs) that measure whether funded interventions achieve impact.

These limitations are most notably illustrated by Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs). However, RCTs are limited to assessing the effects of single treatments on individual outcomes where other observable and non-observable characteristics that can influence the casual change process are controlled. Consequently, RCTs do not assess the effects of multiple inputs on multiple outcomes that characterize comparisons in highly complex open systems, and they do not detect unintended outcomes outside the intervention logic. Such shortcomings do not accord well with the complexities that characterize transformational interventions seeking systems change.

4. **Accountability fixation.** This issue largely overlaps and feeds the above boxes. It is characterized by an emphasis on evaluation methodologies and technologies for measurable designs or framings of single interventions where assessment is more narrowly focused on a linear results chain to more easily assess performance and accountability to predetermined results. However, as noted above, such a focus on planned results can lead to a compliance evaluation that emphasis accountability to the intervention versus the larger human and natural system and the common good for life within. It can also consign evaluation to a descriptive, tick-box, accounting exercise that steers clear of judgement rather than providing judgement that steers decision making. As evaluation pioneer [Michael Scriven \(2016\)](#) notes, this results in an “valuephobia” that undermines evaluation’s core purpose to judge the value, worth, and merit of interventions.

### Transformational pathways for evaluation

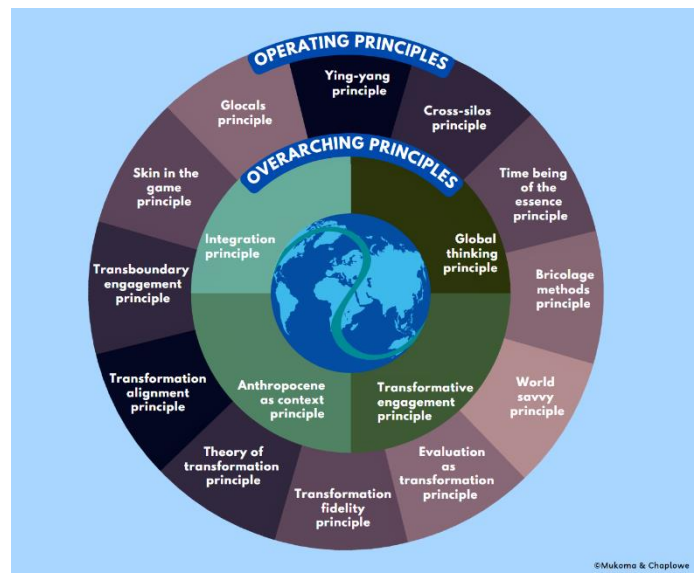
We would be amiss to prescribe one specific approach or method for transformational evaluation. Given the centrality of complexity and systems thinking in transformational work, it is important to maintain an inclusive and adaptive approach that draws upon different methods and perspectives. Therefore, we conclude this EVALSDGs Insight highlighting some examples, (far from exhaustive and not prescriptive), that illustrate potential pathways for evaluation to support transformational change:

- **Complexity adaptive methods.** Each of the above “boxes” that confine evaluation’s transformational potential also carries the kernel of a solution, pointing largely to complexity-smart and systems-savvy approaches to evaluation. From [Developmental Evaluation](#), [Realist Evaluation](#), and [Outcome Harvesting](#), to [Contribution Analysis](#), [Process Tracing](#), and [Bayesian Confidence Updating](#), there are an

assortment of approaches and methods receiving increasing attention for their potential for assessment in complex contexts that characterize international development evaluation like SDG interventions – see [Bamberger et. al., 2016](#) for an overview of complexity adaptive evaluation methods in development evaluation, and CECAN’s 2021 [Complexity Evaluation Toolkit](#) for hands-on guidance for commissioning, designing, and managing complex evaluations.

- **Principle-Focused Evaluation.** Principles inform and guide decisions, and a principles-focused approach to evaluation focuses the assessment on the degree to which principles are fit-for-purpose, followed, and lead to desired transformational change ([Patton, 2017](#)). This is useful because rather than focusing on a set of predetermined results, the evaluation can focus on the journey towards transformational learning and change. This can be more receptive to and supportive of emergent learning and adaptability that is well-suited to the dynamic and fluid contexts in which the SDGs are pursued. Such an approach is notable in [Blue Marble Evaluation](#), which identifies four overarching and twelve operating principles to better understand and further develop human response to global transformational change through evaluation – see **Diagram 1**.

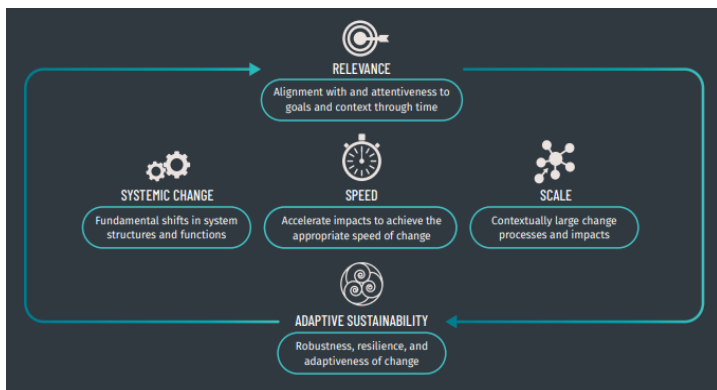
**Diagram 1: Blue Marble Evaluation Principles**



- **Transformational evaluation criteria.** Evaluation criteria typically form the backbone of an evaluation framework. However, the [OECD Development Assistance Committee](#) acknowledges that its evaluation criteria, the most widely used in the world, “are not a particularly useful tool for descriptive analysis of transformative change or systems change.” Therefore, increasing attention has been given to the

identification of new criteria, attributes, and dimensions to evaluate (and design) transformational change interventions (e.g., [IEG](#), 2016; [Patton](#), 2020; [Puri et al.](#), 2021; [TCLP](#), 2022). The five dimensions of transformational change identified by the Climate Investment Fund’s Transformational Change Learning Partnership (TCLP) provides an instructive illustration of work in this area – see **Diagram 2**.

**Diagram 2: TCLP’s Five Dimensions of Transformational Change**



➤ **Data science technologies.** The historic expansion in data technology has tremendous transformational potential. Technological advances in data science, such as Big Data, Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence, and Digital Twins, is reshaping the analytical power and capacity to assess the complex and rapidly changing contexts that characterize sustainable development and transformational change ([Hejnowicz & Chaplowe](#), 2021). Technological innovation has not only increased the volume of data, but has also made it cheaper, faster, more easily distributed, accessible, and scalable to help understand the complex challenges of sustainable development and the transformational goals of the SDGs. Take, for instance, the uptake of Big Data, providing huge, diverse sets of data from multiple sources, including satellite and remote sensor images, digital financial transaction data, social media

streams, internet searches, GPS location data, and .pdf data files. Such data sources offer new possibilities to identify current and longitudinal trends for evaluation. However, the use of big data and computer modelling is not without its potential shortcomings as well (see EVALSDGs [Insights 8](#) and [Insight 9](#)) as well as the more comprehensive report from York and Bamberger (2020), [Measuring Results and Impact in the Age of Big Data: the Nexus of Evaluation, Analytics, and Digital Technology](#).

➤ **Alternative perspectives and paradigms in evaluation.** Our last example is perhaps the most significant because it speaks to the potential to transform evaluation mindsets to leverage transformational change. Different perspectives and worldviews are essential to challenge evaluation as usual and transform evaluation to better support a transformational agenda. From Indigenous and Feminist perspectives to those of Young and Emerging Evaluators, there is an increasing wave of evaluators and alternative perspectives confronting the status quo and challenging the power dynamics in evaluation. This is evident in the movement for and rising attention on [decolonizing evaluation](#), calling attention to localized indigenous perspectives and those of traditionally marginalized populations to access and contribute to information – e.g., see [Chilisa, 2019](#); [Kawakami et al., 2007](#); and [Smith, 2021](#). Those traditionally marginalized in evaluation have accumulated valuable experience, insights, and knowledge that embody key aspects of transformational learning and change. For instance, given the global environmental crisis we now confront, indigenous worldviews are especially relevant given their recognition of the fundamental interdependence between the human and non-human world. Collective work promoting different paradigms in evaluation is reflected by EVALSDGs’ sister EvalPartners networks: [EvalIndigenous](#), [EvalGender](#), and [EvalYouth](#), as well as numerous other initiatives arising in response to the accelerating inequalities and other social and environmental problem.

### Did you know?

EVALSDGs is a global network formed to add value and learning to SDGs, made up of people with a shared interest in evaluation and sustainable development. EVALSDGs Guidance Group (GG) is an EVALSDGs sub-group focusing on strengthening capacity development for evaluation and the SDGs. The EVALSDGs ‘Insights’ are short, light and easy to digest notes presenting ideas and new information, and stimulate thinking to strengthen evaluation capacity.

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