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Fusing foresight and futures thinking for a new transformative evaluation paradigm

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Abstract

This paper explores the role and potential of foresight in evaluation practice in an increasingly uncertain and complex world. Evaluation designs, which have primarily focused on assessing past and present performance, are becoming less adequate for guiding organizations and strategies toward desired futures. Consequently, there is a pressing need for evaluations to adopt a more future-focused approach. This article argues for the integration of foresight and futures thinking into evaluation methodologies to support transformative change and tackle the systemic challenges of our time. By drawing on an evaluation case study from the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, we demonstrate how applied foresight methods, including Horizon Scanning and a modified Delphi method, enhanced the evaluation process. These methods enabled a forward-looking perspective essential for informing strategic decision-making and programming. Specifically, the application of foresight methods in Sitra's evaluation supported assessing the relevance and timeliness of strategic choices, provided options for future programming, and deepened the understanding of complexities around ecological reconstruction and the operational environment. The paper contributes to the evolving discourse and practices on transformative evaluation by offering practical insights into the use of foresight methods, ultimately advocating for a paradigm shift toward more dynamic and future-oriented evaluation practice.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that a futures-focused evaluation approach is instrumental when seeking a more transformational evaluation approach. "Futures-focus" here refers particularly to foresight and futures-thinking which aims to broaden our mindset to understand what is possible, probable, or desirable in the future as well as democratizing futures thinking (Inayatullah & Sweeney, 2021; Sweeney, 2023) This is particularly critical for strategic and systems change evaluations that intend to inform future programming and decision-making (Lynn et al., 2024).

In an uncertain world full of surprises, the role of foresight has become increasingly important as part of strategy work, advocacy, and change-making. The terms volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) have been used since the late 1980s to describe the operating environment for organizations (Taskan et al., 2022). There is significant, yet underutilized, potential in integrating foresight with evaluation to amplify its transformational power. Foresight is a systematic approach to futures studies involving the use of methods and tools to anticipate and prepare for future developments; foresight recognizes factors that affect the future and determines measures required to reach the desired future (Sardar, 2010). Foresight encompasses various definitions, but fundamentally they usually involve identifying factors that influence the future, exploring alternative futures, and determining actions needed to achieve the preferred future (see, e.g., Dufva & Ahlqvist, 2015; Minkkinen et al., 2019; Sardar, 2010). In futures studies, the term "futures" is used in the plural to acknowledge that the future is not predetermined and there isn't a singular, definite future awaiting us. This plurality implies the existence of multiple potential scenarios that require consideration (Miller, 2011).

Evaluations supporting transformational change need to be more forward-looking and require managers and practitioners to consider evaluation as part of the larger system being addressed. Patton notes that "futurists and evaluators share the same purpose—making the future more equitable and sustainable" (Patton, 2019; as cited in Patton, 2021, p. 32). Further, according to Patton "what we are both trying to do, evaluators and futurists, is affect the present so that we affect the future" (Patton, 2021, p. 32). Foresight methods are similar to evaluation methods in that they can be implemented at a small or large scale, rigorously or loosely, and with few inputs or in fully participatory ways. Just like futures thinking, foresight methods do not attempt to predict the future, but rather take data from the past and present and extrapolate it to the future to envision a variety of potentials (Government Office for Science, 2017, 2021).

Navigating complexities challenges evaluation practices as well—the past does not necessarily provide us the compass for the future or guide us toward desired futures. One of the fundamental questions shaping evaluation discourse recently has been how to maintain and enhance the relevance of evaluation function in the "post-normal" context where conventional evaluation approaches might not be adequate. Schwandt (2019), when discussing the concept of postnormal evaluation, suggested "that some significant rethinking of evaluation theory and practice may be taking place" (p. 322) and outlined five intimations for evaluation. These intimations refer to resilience thinking, evaluation's role in returning politics to the people, practical reasoning, co-production, and ethical accountability. Schwandt's intimations are necessary to address complex challenges, but we also need evaluation to understand, facilitate, and accelerate the transformation toward desired changes and better futures.

There is a growing recognition in evaluation discourse that evaluation should transcend its traditional role of assessment and observation to become an active agent of change (see, e.g., Feinstein, 2019; Lynn et al., 2024; Patton, 2021; van den Berg et al., 2019). Developing evaluation and evaluative thinking into a more forward- and future-focused framework is

part of an emerging shift toward transformational evaluation practice and function and toward evaluation for transformational change (van den Berg et al., 2019).

Transformational evaluation involves understanding, analyzing, and accelerating change within systemic change contexts. It moves beyond the conventional, retrospective focus of evaluation, embracing a proactive role in shaping and facilitating change toward preferred futures. Transformation demands a broader approach, incorporating systems thinking, and a deeper examination of overarching narratives and potential future scenarios with a focus on dynamics and interdependencies. Nevertheless, while there is a growing interest in transformative theories of change (Palavicino et al., 2022), the practical application of futures thinking and foresight in transformative and dynamic theories of change remains uncommon.

This article addresses the limited literature on the practical application of foresight methods in evaluation. The article draws from the evaluation framework the authors have developed and implemented for the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra to share insights with evaluators, evaluation commissioners, and scholars on how (and why) foresight methods can be used for transformative evaluation in practice. More specifically, we provide a recent evaluation of Sitra's Sustainability Solutions program as a case to illustrate the potential and challenges of using applied foresight methods. In this evaluation case, futures thinking was integrated across the evaluation criteria and questions, and the data collection methods included Horizon Scanning and a modified Delphi survey. We reflect on how the practical application worked and in what ways foresight enhanced the relevance and use of the evaluation results. We conclude with a discussion on how this evaluation case demonstrates the potential for a more transformative evaluation approach and suggestions for further developing cross-methodological applications of foresight methods for evaluation purposes.

A CASE EXAMPLE OF EVALUATING WITH FORESIGHT METHODS: SITRA'S APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIVE, FUTURES-FOCUSED EVALUATION

The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra is a futures-oriented think-do-and-connect tank. Sitra was established in 1967 and it operates directly under the Finnish Parliament, not government, which means that it is connected to policy making but not within the scope of government's political guidance. Sitra is funded by returns on endowment capital and capital investment, and thus it is financially independent. Sitra's task is to promote the stable and balanced development of Finland and it aims at creating systems changes in the society by funding pilots and experiments, coordinating joint projects, building new ecosystems, and strengthening society's capacity for change. It carries out transformative foresight work with focus on building futures and foresight capabilities in Finland. At the time of writing this article, Sitra's futures work focused on three program areas, which are strengthening Democracy and Participation, providing Sustainability Solutions, and creating a Fair Data Economy. Sitra's new strategy will be operational in late 2024 (Sitra, 2024). Sitra's role as a catalyst of systems change also requires the Fund's evaluation to be transformational and to further support transformational systems change (see also Feinstein, 2019).

Sitra has been pursuing and advocating for this shift to transformative, futures-focused evaluation for the past few years. While evaluating the impact of futures work at Sitra dates back a decade (Vataja et al., 2019), the Sitra evaluation framework was updated in 2021 to better reflect the need to develop foresight-focused evaluation approaches and methods. The evaluation framework and guiding principles are described in Figure 1. While future

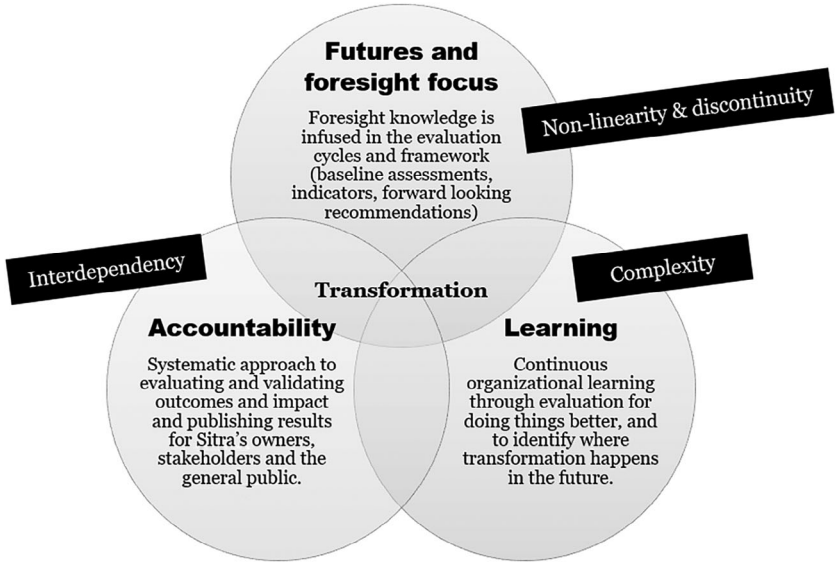

FIGURE 1 Elements of transformational evaluation at Sitra. The model was produced by Thompson Coon et al. (2022), describing the key elements of transformational evaluation at Sitra. From: "Sitra's Evaluation Framework," by Thompson Coon et al. (2022, p. 6), Sitra. Reprinted with permission.

problems are rarely solved based on prior data alone, Sitra's evaluation aims for a balance between retrospective and forward-looking evaluation. For Sitra, this meant a two-pronged approach. First, to infuse foresight into the overall evaluation framework so that foresight formed "officially" the third evaluation pillar, along with accountability and learning. The second prong was to focus on developing methodologies borrowing from foresight methods and tools. This was essential for evaluating the actual foresight work carried out by the organization. The two prongs were seen and are currently being developed as mutually reinforcing and concurrent.

Feinstein (2019) argues that evaluations that aim to be transformative need to be dynamic. Dynamic evaluation is at the core of the Sitra evaluation framework as well. The evaluation framework is an attempt to move away from an emphasis on micro-issues and linearity. "Linearity" here refers to a singular view of the future and the planned interventions and assumptions over the predictability of the operating environment (including the log-frame). The framework directs toward macro issues, a complexity lens, and the use of multiple methods (See Figure 1).

Evaluation case—Sitra's sustainability solutions evaluation

In late 2022, Sitra commissioned a forward-looking outcome evaluation of its Sustainability Solutions program. During the evaluation period 2015–2022, the program had a broad overall objective to ensure and accelerate adaptation to planetary boundaries through ecological reconstruction of society and everyday life. In 2022 Sitra was transitioning to new programmatic focus areas.

Multiple considerations were taken into account in the initial rationale for integrating foresight methods into the evaluation design. In the design, the foresight methods were seen as having the potential for supporting the evaluation in: (i) validating the relevance and timeliness of current strategic choices/programming; (ii) providing futures

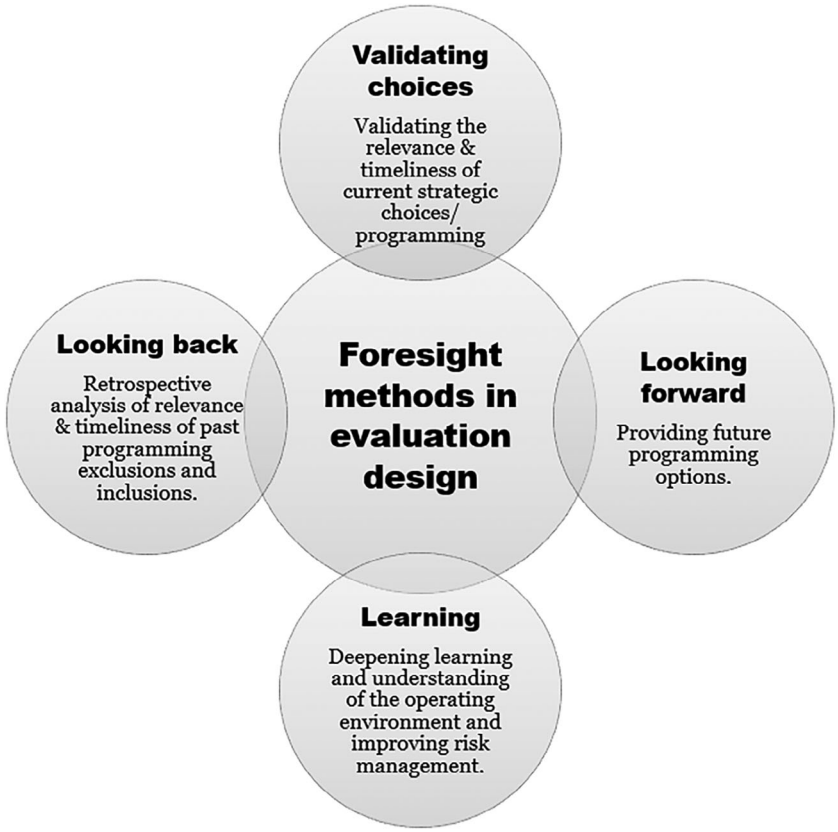

FIGURE 2 Potential uses of foresight methods in evaluation design. *Source*: Authors.

programming options; (iii) deepening learning and understanding of the complexity of the issues around ecological reconstruction and the operating environment; and (iv) conducting a retrospective analysis of relevance and timeliness of past programming through possible exclusion and inclusion of phenomena identified through the Horizon Scanning exercise (see Figure 2). While the relative success of these initial considerations will be discussed later in this article, the initial evaluation design thinking is reconstructed as a visual below in Figure 2. These methodological considerations may prove useful to evaluation practitioners when designing forward-looking evaluations.

The evaluation used an innovative mixed-methods approach, following the above-mentioned organization-wide evaluation framework and approach. The evaluation design incorporated and adapted two foresight methods: Horizon Scanning and a Delphi method (Hjelt et al., 2023).

The two-part foresight process used in the evaluation started with Horizon Scanning and was followed by a two-round Delphi method (see Figure 3). Horizon Scanning is a systematic foresight method used to search for early signs of changes in operational environments. The goal of Horizon Scanning is to help organizations to understand and respond to emerging weak signals, trends, and events that could be significant and impact their work in the future. It is a key part of foresight and is often used in combination with other foresight methods, such as Delphi panels and scenarios, to inform strategic planning, decision-making, and strategy development (Slaughter, 1997; see also, Government Office for Science, 2017, 2021).

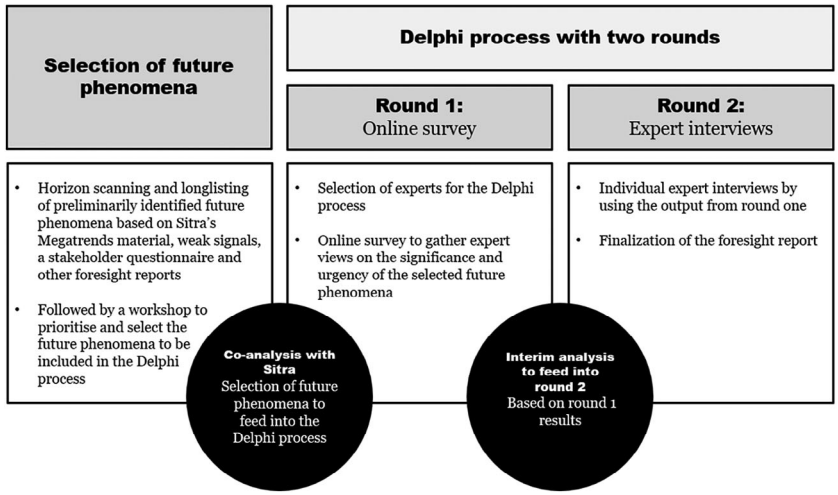

FIGURE 3 Description of the foresight process for Sitra's sustainability solutions evaluation. The figure was produced by Hjelt et al. (2023), describing the foresight process for Sitra's Sustainability Solutions Evaluation. From: "Evaluation of Sitra's Sustainability Solutions theme. Part 2: Insights for possible future priorities" by Hjelt et al. (2023, p. 9).

As part of the evaluation's data collection phase the Horizon Scanning exercise aimed to identify the most significant future phenomena related to ecological sustainability, obtain insight, and to support Sitra in developing and directing its work. The key question in Horizon Scanning was: what are the main future phenomena that Sitra could include on its agenda? The scope of the scanning was limited to considering ecological sustainability within the European context and in a 10-year time horizon. The evaluation team identified 47 futures phenomena based on a stakeholder questionnaire and a broad range of foresight reports, such as Sitra's megatrends (Dufva & Rekola, 2024) and weak signals (Dufva & Rowley, 2022). Out of these, 20 of the most significant were prioritized and selected in a joint workshop with Sitra and the evaluators.

The Delphi method is a structured communication and data collection technique originally developed as an interactive foresight method and relies on a selected panel of experts. It often aims to explore alternatives, correlate expert opinions on a specific issue, and reveal consensus by using two or more rounds of questionnaires to collect insights. The iterations allow panelists to clarify and reassess their views and build on others' contributions. Delphi panel differs from regular surveys by focusing on what could or should be rather than asking what is (Jayawardena et al., 2022). While it has been a widely used foresight method with various applications, in the evaluation context it has not been widely deployed, although there are a few recent evaluation cases (see e.g., Jayawardena et al., 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Finland, 2023).

The Delphi process included two rounds: an online survey and individual expert interviews. The objective of the panel was to assess and rank the selected phenomena as well as consider their impact on the future. Seven public and private sector experts with foresight, futures, and sustainability backgrounds participated in the Delphi process as panelists. From these panelists, five attended both rounds of Delphi, whereas two participated only in the second round of interviews. In the first round, participants were asked to fill an online survey where the selected 20 phenomena (from the above-mentioned Horizon Scanning exercise) were categorized under four themes: trends, solutions, values, and emerging issues. The list included selected future phenomena, such as *socially just transition; climate*

migration and refugees; scarcity of critical natural resources; diversifying forest use—nature-based services; nature-positive and regenerative economic models; and *the health of human and nature intertwined (planetary health)* (see the full list, Hjelt et al., 2023, p. 15). The respondents were asked to assess questions such as: (i) how much the significance of the phenomena will increase in the next 10 years; (ii) how much more attention and resources will they require in Europe than is currently the case; and (iii) which of these phenomena should a sustainability and future-focused organization invest time and resources in during the next 10 years.

In the second round, the evaluators conducted individual interviews with the panelists to deepen the analysis around the findings of the first round. The interviewees were asked to specify to what extent they agree or disagree with the synthesis of the survey results and what further thoughts the results evoke. Those who participated in the interview also had the opportunity to change their previous views, although this was not particularly encouraged.

As a result of the Delphi process, the panelists identified two phenomena that received both the highest points in terms of increasing significance and the attention and resources required in the next ten years. These were: (i) *the intertwined health of humans and nature (planetary health)* and (ii) *nature-positive and regenerative economic models*. The two most significant phenomena were strongly supported by all the panelists. A detailed description of the results from the Horizon Scanning and the Delphi process is available in the final report *Evaluation of Sitra's sustainability solution theme* (Hjelt et al., 2023).

DISCUSSION AND LESSONS FROM SITRA'S EVALUATION CASE

Returning to the earlier outlined initial rationale for integrating foresight methods in the evaluation design, this section briefly analyzes the actual applicability, utility, and added value of two foresight methods.

First, for validating the relevance and timeliness of current strategic choices and programming, both the Horizon Scanning and the Delphi method proved relevant and complemented other data points. Many of the phenomena identified in the foresight exercise were indeed already under implementation, strengthening the evaluation analysis on whether the programming themes were timely and relevant. This outcome is perhaps unsurprising, considering Sitra's strategy and programming are heavily influenced by its extensive trend analysis.

Second, with respect to providing future programming options, the foresight methods were useful because findings were relevant for broader stakeholders in the context of sustainability transformation. Within Sitra, the new programming choices had just been finalized at the outcome-level and the use of the findings might be limited to fine tuning new and pipeline programming. As of the writing of this article, it is too early to say whether these identified future programming options will be implemented. However, for those organizations without in-house foresight functions (unlike Sitra), incorporating foresight in an evaluation process might deliver more impactful insights.

The third aspect considered was whether or to what extent the use of foresight methods could support deepening learning and understanding the complexity of the issues around ecological reconstruction and the related operating environment. While the Horizon Scanning exercise focused on identifying the phenomena, the Delphi process facilitated a deep-dive into the complexities around the theme and more insights to be generated via in-depth interviews and analysis (Hjelt et al., 2023). The evaluation process involved extensive sense-making and collaboration to deeply understand the findings. This included workshops with key stakeholders, such as the Sitra management, board

members, programming teams as well as evaluators. In addition to these participatory elements, incorporating a foresight exercise as part of the evaluation elevated the foresight insights to a more strategic level, compared to previous standalone foresight activities.

The fourth rationale outlined earlier relates to the potential of using foresight methods for retrospective analysis of the relevance and timeliness of past programming. The idea of the retrospective analysis was related to one of the evaluation questions, which focused the evaluation on exploring how past programming choices were decided (exclusions and inclusions of phenomena related to sustainability transformation). Nevertheless, this proved to be a very challenging undertaking and was dropped during the inception phase. The limitation included lack of data of past programming decisions, the fact that the evaluation design was already methodologically complex, and the forward-looking elements of the evaluation were prioritized.

Overall, and while not an original aim, integrating foresight in the evaluation process seemed to enhance internal interest (i.e., inside the organization) in the evaluation. It also potentially improved the utilization of the findings, as the scope of the evaluation included broader insights on the theme relevant to broader sustainability actors. Internally, the evaluation findings were used extensively in Sitra's new strategy development process in 2024. The insights from the foresight exercise have been disseminated through several blogs and articles (see, e.g., Hjelt, 2024; Hjelt et al., 2023; Järvinen et al., 2024; Moisio et al., 2023), these can be summarized as: (i) combining foresight methods in the evaluation frame makes the evaluation more transformational; (ii) diversifying methods, including those of foresight, improves the robustness of the evaluation design; (ii) using a participatory, co-creation approach is critical in an innovative evaluation design; and (iv) paying attention to the scoping of foresight work is important (Moisio et al., 2023).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPING TRANSFORMATIONAL EVALUATION IN THE "POST-NORMAL"

At the beginning of this article, we referred to Schwandt's five intimations to "post-normal evaluation" (Schwandt, 2019). In this article, we argue that to achieve transformative change, evaluation methodologies must evolve to become more dynamic and forward-looking. Harnessing foresight and futures thinking as evaluation's strategic partner could perhaps provide the sixth intimation to "post-normal" evaluation in order to facilitate systemic change and navigate the complexities and uncertainty of our time. The sixth intimation, therefore, involves the capability to utilize foresight as part of evaluation.

Schwandt (2019) notes that so-called "normal evaluation" has been driven by scientific rationality, focusing on the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions and bolstering social progress and modernization. However, current societal challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, democratic crises, and rapid development of technology and digitalization, are intrinsically complex and cannot always be addressed through isolated projects and programs. Addressing these issues necessitates systems changes, impacting various societal levels including thought processes (knowledge, values, and attitudes), operational models, structures, and individual behavior (beliefs, motivation). When strategies become more future-oriented and focused on ecosystems, evaluation must respond to new purposes and questions.

Strategies or organizations aiming to address complex problems and foster the required systemic changes seek to engage in long-term societal transformation. Systemic change might be promoted through a series of short-term projects and actions, yet the realization of such change may span decades. Therefore, promoting systemic change, which benefits from systematic futures thinking, is intrinsically linked to building a better future. Theories

of change in evaluation should incorporate assumptions on futures and insights regarding potential and alternative futures trajectories. In sum, the necessity for adaptable evaluation methods has taken on new significance, challenging traditional approaches.

Navigating and influencing futures trajectories more effectively

There are important similarities and differences in understanding about foresight methods in the context of evaluation. Unlike attempting to precisely predict the future, foresight, akin to evaluation, aids in decision-making about futures that inherently embody uncertainty. As Patton (2019) suggests, futurists do so by looking ahead and asking what may occur, whereas evaluators look back to what has already occurred identifying results and learnings for the future. Several key ideas are important to understand for using foresight to support the transformative power of evaluation. In this article we have used futures thinking in reference to an orientation and ability to explore and envision possible futures. It helps us to understand how the future affects the present and, conversely, how the decisions and actions in the present affect the future (Government Office for Science, 2021).

There are always inherently some assumptions on futures and power in evaluation, although not explicitly recognized and discussed. Foresight can support evaluation in expanding discussions on alternative and novel futures, pathways and agency toward a transformative change, and to foster more diverse and inclusive discourse on desirable and attainable futures (Lynn et al., 2024). Transformation and critical foresight practices seek to heighten awareness and prompt critical questions about the power over the future: Whose future is being discussed, who defines it, and who influences it? (Dufva and Rekola (2024); Gidley, 2017; Minkkinen et al., 2019).

An example of the potential method for the use of evaluation is the Futures Lens (Poussa & Ylikoski, 2024). It is a tool for democratizing the future and helping evaluators examine the power to define futures with the stakeholders and consider the choices involved. Transformational evaluation particularly benefits from foresight practices that augment the capacity to envision alternative futures and shape future directions.

While the evaluation case suggests potential for making evaluation more transformational, concrete examples in this field remain sparse and we underscore the need for more use of foresight in evaluation. This leads to a call to action: exploring the necessary levels of futures-thinking and foresight capacity and capabilities required for evaluators, commissioners, and managers, as well as users of evaluation results.

To effectively incorporate foresight methods into evaluation practices, the evaluation community would benefit from increased training and capacity-building opportunities. We need more evaluators who have foresight competencies and more foresight practitioners with evaluation expertise. The professional development workshops organized in conjunction with the evaluation conferences are important in taking this agenda forward. The European Evaluation Society conferences in 2022 and 2023 already had a few of such (workshops by Gardner, 2023; Gardner & Barela, 2022; Thompson Coon et al., 2022), and good attendance indicates a growing interest in such workshops.

As we conclude, the future of evaluation lies in its ability to evolve into a more dynamic, anticipatory, and transformative practice. This requires not only a change in methods but, more fundamentally, a change in mindset and how we perceive and value the role of evaluation in shaping the future. A forward-looking evaluation paradigm must inherently consider the systemic and interdependent nature of changes. It must provide insights that are not only reflective of past and present conditions but are also anticipatory of future potential. By integrating foresight and futures thinking into evaluation practices, as

demonstrated through the Sitra case study, we unlock the ability to navigate and influence futures trajectories more effectively. This approach enables organizations and societies to align their strategic choices with long-term sustainability and resilience, ensuring that actions taken today contribute to desired futures.

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