

From Hindsight to Foresight: How Evaluation Can Help Us Prepare for Uncertain Futures

Summary of the EvalforEarth Discussion

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ABSTRACT

This EvalforEarth discussion explored how evaluation can become more future-informed, particularly in food security, environmental and agricultural development contexts. The discussion began from a shared recognition that evaluation has traditionally been strongest at explaining what happened, what worked, what did not, for whom, and why. However, many programs now operate in contexts defined by climate volatility, ecological stress, food insecurity, conflict, political uncertainty, constrained resources, technological change and shifting social expectations. In these conditions, evaluation needs to help decision-makers make sense of change, revisit assumptions, and adjust strategies as realities shift.



A central theme of the discussion was the distinction between foresight and prediction. Rather than attempting to forecast a single outcome, foresight helps evaluators explore uncertainty in a more structured way by identifying emerging risks and opportunities, examining weak signals, and considering how different futures may affect present decisions. Participants reflected on how tools such as horizon scanning, scenarios, Causal Layered Analysis, Futures Triangle, Three Horizons, wind-tunnelling and backcasting can support evaluation processes to become more adaptive, reflective, and responsive to change.

The discussion also raised important cautions. Several contributors stressed that future-informed evaluation should not become a superficial add-on or a generic toolbox exercise. The value of foresight depends less on the tools themselves than on the judgment needed to determine when futures thinking is relevant, how deeply it should be integrated, and what kinds of decisions it is expected to support. The discussion underscored the importance of local knowledge, participatory approaches, plural ways of knowing and culturally grounded interpretation, particularly in food systems, climate resilience and environmental governance. Overall, the discussion reflected a growing recognition that evaluation has an important role to play in helping organizations and communities navigate changing and uncertain futures.

OBJECTIVES

The discussion invited EvalforEarth members to reflect on how foresight can strengthen evaluation practice in food security, environmental and agricultural development. In particular, contributors explored how evaluation can support better decision-making in uncertain and rapidly changing contexts; how future-oriented tools can be integrated into evaluation design, implementation, analysis and recommendations; and what foresight capacities evaluators, commissioners and organizations may need to use in practical and responsible ways.

The conversation also examined what future-informed evaluation could look like in real programs, particularly those working in areas shaped by climate risk, food systems change, environmental pressures, natural resource governance, agricultural livelihoods, resilience challenges.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. In contexts of climate uncertainty, rapid environmental change, and shifting geopolitical realities, where have you seen the limits of retrospective evaluation? How has this affected the use of findings?
2. What foresight tools or methods have you encountered in your evaluation practice? What made them useful or difficult to apply? What foresight tools, if any, have you used personally?
3. How might our interpretations of the DAC criteria (such as relevance and sustainability) through a foresight lens change what we measure, how we measure, and how we make recommendations?
4. Where do you see opportunities for integrating foresight and evaluation in food security, environmental, and agricultural contexts?
5. What skills, resources, and institutional changes would be needed to make foresight a regular part of evaluation design and commissioning?

TEN KEY CONTRIBUTIONS AND INSIGHTS

1. Why Retrospective Evaluation is Becoming Insufficient

Participants agreed that evaluation remains essential for understanding past performance and supporting accountability, learning, and decision-making. But many contributors also noted that retrospective evidence alone is often insufficient in contexts shaped by uncertainty and rapid change. Food security, environmental, and agricultural programs now operate under increasingly unstable conditions, including climate disruption, market volatility, political instability, migration pressures, biodiversity loss, and resource constraints. In these environments, evaluations can quickly lose relevance if the assumptions behind programs are no longer holding.

Another concern raised throughout the discussion was timing. Evaluation findings often arrive after key decisions have already been made, budgets allocated, partnerships restructured, or strategic priorities shifted. Contributors therefore emphasized the need to integrate future-oriented learning earlier in the evaluation cycle so that evaluation can better support adaptation, strategic reflection, and decision-making in changing conditions.

2. Foresight should be understood as structured thinking about uncertainty, not prediction

A recurring theme in the discussion was the need to distinguish foresight from forecasting or speculation. Contributors noted that evaluators are often cautious about futures thinking because evaluation is expected to remain evidence-based and credible.

But participants stressed that foresight is not about predicting a single outcome. Its value lies in helping evaluators explore uncertainty more systematically, examine assumptions, and think through how changing conditions may affect present decisions.

This was seen as particularly important for evaluation practice. Future-informed evaluation does not require evaluators to make unsupported claims about what will happen. Instead, it encourages closer attention to emerging risks, fragile assumptions, shifting conditions, and the resilience of recommendations under uncertainty

Many participants saw this as a practical extension of evaluation itself, especially in contexts where conditions are changing faster than traditional evaluation cycles can capture.

3. Future-informed evaluation can strengthen theories of change

A strong theme in the discussion was the need to rethink how evaluators use theories of change. Several participants noted that many theories of change are often treated as static planning frameworks that describe intended pathways from activities to outcomes and impact. In practice, however, these pathways are shaped by uncertainty, disruption, emergence or changing system conditions.

Several contributors argued that theories of change should be approached as living hypotheses rather than fixed statements of program logic. From this perspective, evaluation can ask not only whether the theory of change was implemented, but whether the assumptions behind a program still hold and how they may be affected by future trends, shocks, and uncertainties.

This was seen as particularly relevant in food security, agriculture, and climate resilience work. An agricultural livelihoods program may depend on assumptions about land access, seasonal stability, input markets, or labor availability that become less reliable over time. A climate resilience program may be built around strategies that are effective under current conditions but less viable under future climate pressures. Similarly, food systems interventions may rely on policy frameworks, consumer behaviors, or market conditions that can shift rapidly. Future-informed evaluation can make these assumptions more visible and assess whether they remain credible.

Several contributors identified this as one of the most practical entry points for integrating foresight into evaluation. Rather than treating futures thinking as a separate futures exercise, evaluators can begin by asking future-oriented questions about the assumptions, logic, and long-term viability of a program itself.

4. Where Foresight tools become useful in evaluation

The discussion explored several foresight tools that could strengthen evaluation in contexts shaped by uncertainty and rapid change.

Horizon scanning was discussed as a useful tool during evaluation design because it can help identify emerging trends, weak signals and external pressures that may affect the program or sector over time. In food security and environmental contexts, these may include climate signals, policy shifts, market disruptions, technological change, land-use pressures, conflict risks, or changing livelihood patterns and community priorities.

The Futures Triangle was presented as a method of examining the relationship between present pressures, preferred futures, and the institutional or historical factors that may constrain change. Contributors noted its relevance in situations where programs are expected to support transformation while operating within systems that resist adaptation.

Causal Layered Analysis was highlighted as particularly useful for moving beyond visible problems and system dynamics to examine deeper worldviews, values and narratives. Several participants saw this as especially relevant in evaluations dealing with systems change, transformation, resilience or regenerative development, where technical interventions may be constrained by underlying assumptions about growth, productivity, nature, risk, power or community agency.

Scenario planning was frequently discussed as a practical way of exploring how different future conditions may affect program relevance, effectiveness or sustainability. Scenarios are especially valuable when uncertainty, when strategic choices depend heavily choices depend on external conditions.

Three Horizons was described as a useful framework for structuring conversations about transition, including what needs to be maintained, what may no longer be viable, and what kinds of systems or practices may be emerging.

Contributors also referred to approaches such as **wind-tunnelling** and **backcasting** as ways of testing recommendations, strategies, and long-term goals against different future conditions. Across the discussion, they emphasized that these tools are not intended to be used mechanically or in every evaluation. Their usefulness depends on the context, the purpose of the evaluation, the decisions being supported, and the depth of analysis required.

5. The issue is not only tools, but timing, depth, and intent

Several contributors stressed that integrating foresight into evaluation involves more than simply adding new tools or approaches. A trends table, scenario exercise, or risk matrix may appear future-oriented without substantially improving the usefulness of the evaluation itself. Participants noted that foresight can easily become superficial when it is added too late, applied generically, or disconnected from real decisions and learning needs.

A recurring theme in the discussion was the importance of professional judgement. In fact, contributors emphasized that future-informed evaluation requires careful decisions about when futures thinking is relevant, how deeply it should be integrated, whose perspectives should shape the process, and what kinds of decisions the evaluation is expected to inform. For example, a brief horizon scan may be sufficient for a relatively bounded evaluation, while a complex systems transformation initiative may require deeper scenario work, participatory sensemaking or Causal Layered Analysis.

In some cases, a light horizon scan may be sufficient. In others, particularly in complex systems transformation initiatives, deeper scenario work, participatory sensemaking, or Causal Layered Analysis may be more appropriate.

Participants also noted that timing matters. When foresight is introduced only at the end of an evaluation, it may have limited influence. When integrated earlier in the process, it can shape evaluation questions, stakeholder engagement, evidence collection, analysis and recommendations. Several contributors noted that this can help ensure evaluation respond more effectively to strategic learning needs rather than focusing only on retrospective accountability.

Intent also matters. Foresight should not be used to make an evaluation appear innovative. It should be used because there is a genuine need to understand uncertainty, test assumptions, explore alternatives or support future-facing decisions. Contributors cautioned against treating futures thinking as a branding exercise or as a way of making evaluations appear more innovative than they actually are.

6. Future-informed in food security, agriculture and environmental development

Participants consistently highlighted the relevance for future-informed evaluation in food security, environmental and agricultural development. These sectors operate under long time horizons, ecological uncertainty, climate pressures, changing livelihoods, market conditions, and complex relationships between communities, institutions, and natural systems.

In agriculture, evaluations often need to consider whether interventions can remain viable under changing rainfall, soil conditions, input costs, market access, or policy incentives. In food security, evaluators may also need to examine not only current outcomes but also vulnerability to future shocks, resilience capacities, and changing patterns of risk. Several participants noted that, in environmental programs, sustainability cannot be assessed simply by asking whether activities continued after project closure. It also involves understanding whether ecological, institutional and community systems are prepared for future pressures.

Participants also noted that many programs in these sectors are framed around resilience, adaptation or systems change. Yet evaluations of these programs often remain too linear, too retrospective or too focused on short-term outputs. Future-informed evaluation was seen as one way of addressing this gap by helping evaluators examine whether interventions are strengthening adaptive capacity and supporting conditions for long-term change.

7. Local and plural knowledge must shape the futures being explored

A key theme in the discussion was that futures thinking cannot not be shaped only by experts, consultants, or institutional decision-makers. Participants emphasized that affected communities, local organizations, farmers, youth, women, Indigenous knowledge holders, and other stakeholders should help define what futures matter, what risks are visible, which signals are emerging, and what forms of resilience are meaningful in practice.

Several participants stressed that this is especially important in food security, agriculture, and environmental work, where many interventions are shaped by external assumptions about development, productivity, markets, innovation and sustainability. Without meaningful local participation, foresight risks reproducing the same power imbalances that evaluation is often expected to challenge. Future-informed evaluation should therefore ask: Whose future is being imagined? Whose knowledge counts as evidence? Whose risks are prioritized? Whose preferred futures are made visible?

Participants also recognized that local actors often recognize emerging changes before they appear in formal data. Farmers may observe changes in rainfall, pest patterns, or soil conditions long before these trends are formally documented. Youth may identify changing aspirations, migration patterns or digital opportunities. Local organizations may understand political sensitivities, trust dynamics, and informal systems that shape whether interventions are likely to endure.

Overall, contributors emphasized that future-informed evaluation becomes stronger when formal evidence is combined with grounded, participatory and culturally informed interpretation.

8. Evaluation recommendations should be tested against plausible futures

Several participants noted that evaluation recommendations are often written on the assumption that future conditions will broadly resemble the present. Recommendations may be technically sound while remaining strategically fragile. For example, they may depend on stable funding, political continuity, institutional capacity, community trust or environmental conditions that may shift over time.

Participants discussed how future-informed evaluation can strengthen recommendations by testing them against plausible scenarios. This can help distinguish between different types of recommendations:

- Some recommendations are robust and remain relevant across several futures.
- Some are urgent because delay could increase vulnerability or narrow future options.
- Some are conditional and depend on specific signals, assumptions, or external conditions.
- Some are risky because they rely on conditions that may not hold over time.
- Some may need to be sequenced differently, adapted, or reconsidered if the contexts change.

Several contributors noted that this approach can make recommendations more useful to decision-makers while also encouraging greater honesty about uncertainty. Rather than presenting recommendations as fixed prescriptions, evaluators can frame them as strategic options shaped by different levels of risk, adaptability, and resilience under changing conditions

9. Organizational culture and commissioning practices need to change

The discussion highlighted that future-informed evaluation depends as much on institutional culture and commissioning practices as it does on tools or approaches.

Many evaluations are primarily commissioned for compliance purposes, often under tight timelines and with limited flexibility for adaptation or reflection. In such cases, it is difficult to integrate foresight meaningfully. Participants suggested that commissioners play an important role in shaping whether future-oriented learning becomes part of the evaluation process. Several contributors suggested that terms of reference could place greater attention on uncertainty, emerging risks, future relevance, and the resilience of recommendations under changing conditions.

The discussion also pointed to the importance of leadership and organizational culture. Evidence is more likely to influence decisions when organizations create space for learning, reflection and honest discussion. Future-informed evaluation may require institutions to question existing assumptions, revisit existing plans, and engage more openly with the alternative pathways.

Participants noted that evaluators may also need new capacities. These include facilitation skills, systems thinking, scenario design, horizon scanning, participatory futures methods, strategic sensemaking and the ability to communicate uncertainty clearly. At the same time, evaluators do not all need to become professional futurists. In many cases, the solution may be collaboration between evaluators, foresight practitioners, local experts and sector specialists.

10. Foresight can make evaluation more useful to decision-makers

Some participants acknowledged concerns that adding futures thinking into evaluation could dilute rigor or move evaluation too far into speculation. However, much of the discussion pointed in the opposite direction: when used well, foresight can strengthen evidence use by making evaluation more relevant to real decisions in changing conditions.

Contributors emphasized that future-informed evaluation does not replace empirical evidence. Instead, it encourages evaluators to consider how evidence should be interpreted under uncertainty and how changing conditions may affect the relevance of findings over time. This can also help decision-makers engage more critically with assumptions, trade-offs and strategic risks and choices.

In this sense, future-informed evaluation was seen as one way of strengthening the connection between evidence and decision-making. The discussion repeatedly returned to a series of practical questions: What decisions is the evaluation expected to inform? What uncertainties surround those decisions? What evidence is needed now? Which signals should continue to be monitored after the evaluation ends? How can recommendations better support adaptation rather than only compliance?

Participants saw this as a critical opportunity for EvalforEarth and the wider evaluation community. Evaluation can remain grounded in evidence while becoming more responsive to uncertainty, adaptation, and long-term change.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE FOR EVALUATION COMMISSIONERS

Several contributors emphasized that commissioners play an important role in shaping whether future-informed evaluation becomes meaningful in practice. This may involve examining assumptions, conducting light-touch horizon scanning, testing recommendations against plausible futures or facilitating strategic sensemaking sessions with stakeholders. Commissioners should also ensure that timelines, budgets and deliverables allow for meaningful reflection rather than only retrospective reporting.

For evaluation teams

Evaluation teams can begin with practical steps. They may include reviewing theories of change as living hypothesis, examining which assumptions have held and which ones may be weakening, and identifying emerging risks and uncertainties. Contributors also discussed integrating futures questions into interviews and workshops, as well as using scenarios or wind-tunnelling to test recommendations. Several participants emphasized the importance of communicating uncertainty clearly without overstating confidence.

For program teams

Participants noted that evaluation teams can use evaluation as an opportunity to revisit strategic direction and implementation models in changing conditions. Future-informed evaluation can help identify where adaptation is needed, where current approaches remain viable, and where deeper transformation may be required. It can also support the development of monitoring systems that track emerging signals and changing conditions alongside predefined indicators.

For local partners and communities

Local actors should be involved as interpreters of change and contributors to future-oriented learning processes. Their knowledge can help identify emerging risks, contextualize evidence and challenge assumptions that external evaluators or funders may miss. Contributors emphasized that this is particularly important in food, agriculture and environmental systems, where lived experience and ecological knowledge are central to understanding change.

For the EvalforEarth community

The discussion also pointed to opportunities for continued learning and capacity strengthening within the EvalforEarth community. Participants highlighted the potential value of practical examples, templates, short trainings and peer exchange on how to integrate foresight into evaluation processes. Areas identified for future exploration included scenario-informed recommendations, participatory futures approaches, future-oriented theories of change, and the use of foresight in climate, food systems and environmental evaluations.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion reinforced the view that evaluation remains essential for understanding performance, accountability, and learning. At the same time, contributors repeatedly emphasized that many programs now operate in conditions shaped by climate volatility, food insecurity, ecological disruption, conflict, technological change and constrained resource constraints. In these contexts, evaluation increasingly needs to help organizations and communities respond to changing conditions, examine assumptions, and think more carefully about future risks and decisions.

Participants also emphasized that foresight is not prediction. Rather, it offers ways of working more systematically with uncertainty, testing assumptions, and exploring how supporting different future conditions may affect present choices. When integrated into evaluation, foresight can help strengthen learning, support more resilient recommendations, and make evaluation findings more useful for decision-making in changing environments. Across the discussion, five themes emerged consistently:

1. Evaluation needs to become more responsive to uncertainty and changing conditions.
2. Theories of change should be treated as living hypotheses that can be revisited against changing conditions.
3. Foresight tools such as horizon scanning, scenarios, Causal Layered Analysis, Three Horizons, Futures Triangle, and wind-tunnelling can strengthen evaluation when used with the right timing, depth and intent.
4. Local and plural knowledge must play a central role in shaping how future risks, priorities, and possibilities are understood.
5. Future-informed evaluation requires supportive institutional cultures, appropriate capacities, and commissioning practices that allow space for learning, reflection, and adaptation.

For food security, environmental and agricultural development, the implications are significant. These sectors already operate in relation to the future, including climate conditions, livelihoods, ecosystems, and intergenerational change. Evaluation must therefore become better equipped to examine changing conditions, reassess assumptions, and support decisions in uncertain contexts. The discussion also pointed to an important opportunity for EvalforEarth to continue building a community of practice around future-informed evaluation that is rigorous, practical, participatory and grounded in the realities of food systems, climate resilience and environmental change.

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