A Reading Guide

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Evaluation is a dynamic, evolving, global profession. This book reflects and illuminates that dynamism, evolution, and global engagement. To place this book in context and help you appreciate its significance, let me preface the new directions presented in these pages with some historical context.

Evaluation as a profession has been international in orientation and membership from its formal association beginnings in the mid-1970s when the Australasian Evaluation Society, the Canadian Evaluation Society, and American Evaluation Association predecessors (the Evaluation Network and the Evaluation Research Society) were all formed. The European Evaluation Society was founded in 1992.

The African Evaluation Association was formed in 1999 in Nairobi. The Latin American Evaluation Network was conceived in Lima in 2003, bringing together the networks of Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. Networks and associations in other regions followed. The International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) was inaugurated in 2002 in Beijing to help fill a gap in the international evaluation architecture. This was followed by international conferences, which are now biennial. The conference themes provide an overview of issues in development evaluation, issues still being addressed in the current volume. Watch for these recurring themes, and how they have evolved, as you read this book:

- New Delhi, 2005: "Evaluation for Development—Beyond Aid"
- Johannesburg, 2009: "Getting to Results: Evaluation Capacity Building and Development"
- Jordan, 2011: "Evaluation in Turbulent Times: The Crises of Food, Fuel, and Finances"
- Barbados, 2013: "Evaluation and Inequality: Moving Beyond the Discussion of Poverty"
- Bangkok, 2015: "Evaluating Sustainable Development"
- Mexico, 2017: "Evaluation of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Life through Global and Regional Partnerships"

The 21st century has seen exponential international growth and development of evaluation, highlighted in 2015 as the International Year of Evaluation, as recognized by the United Nations. By 2017, more than a hundred voluntary organizations for professional evaluation had been formed representing thousands of evaluators worldwide.

TEN EVALUATION TRENDS TO LOOK FOR IN THIS VOLUME

The evolution of evaluation reflects the profession's development and adaptation to a rapidly changing world. The practice of evaluation is inextricably linked to changes in the world. At any given moment, evaluation practice worldwide will include traditional ways of doing evaluation that have become established over the last 50 years as well as innovative new directions that are on the leading edge of both development and evaluation. This volume reflects that mix. With that in mind, I offer my top 10 list of things to look for in this book. To the extent that you can identify these developments and challenges, and make the distinctions between traditional evaluation approaches and innovative new directions, you understand the history, dynamism, and future of our profession. As is the case with top 10 lists, I offer a countdown, concluding with the most important challenge—at least as I see it. I would add that my list is necessarily subjective and based upon my own observations and biases, so by offering this list, I invite readers to think about your own observations of evaluation trends and challenges, and look for how the authors in this book acknowledge and engage with those trends and challenges.

10. New evaluands. "Evaluand" refers to the focus of an evaluation, the thing evaluated. Traditional evaluands are projects and programs, which we do an excellent job of evaluating.

We know how to specify SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) and develop performance indicators. We have become skilled at developing logic models and theories of change. We know why and how to distinguish monitoring from evaluation, the different types of evaluation (utilization focused, impact, theory driven, cost-benefit, empowerment, participatory, social justice, etc.), the diverse uses of evaluation (accountability, learning, decision making, enlightenment, etc.), and the importance of working with diverse stakeholders (program staff, policy makers, funders, participants, etc.). We have standards for what constitutes evaluation quality and checklists for what should be included in an evaluation. We know the importance of specifying intended use by intended users. We have a variety of ways of reporting findings. This is by no means a comprehensive or exhaustive list, but, hopefully, it provides a sense that we've learned a lot, know how to do a lot, and merit the designation of being a knowledge-based profession.

But new evaluands beckon. The emergent challenges for evaluation, from my perspective, primarily have to do with new units of analysis and broader areas of focus for evaluation.

Evaluation, we say, "grew up in the projects." As evidenced by what we do well, the profession's origins lie in evaluating projects, and, from my

perspective, we remain in the grip of a self-limiting project mentality. Evaluating community impacts, regional and sectorwide initiatives, cross-sector initiatives, networks and collaborations, global leadership development, innovation, and collective impact pose new conceptual and methodological challenges. In addition, and along parallel tracks, evaluators are being challenged to develop new approaches to evaluating the scaling of innovations, assessing the effects of social media, and using "big data" to examine large and open systems. Ecosystem governance is a leading-edge evaluand and cannot be evaluated as if it is a project or program.

Evaluating principles, such as the 2005 Paris Declaration on International Development Aid, is also different from evaluating projects. Principles-driven programs are different from goals-driven programs. Principles constitute a different kind of evaluand. Principles take on added importance among the new challenges for evaluation because principles are the primary way of navigating complex dynamic systems and engaging in strategic initiatives. Principles undergird efforts at community change and collective impact. Understanding how to evaluate principles, and adapting evaluation concepts, approaches, methods, and processes through principles-focused evaluation will, I believe, provide valuable direction for how to evaluate other new evaluands as we grapple with related emergent challenges (Patton 2018).

So, as you read, watch for new evaluands, innovative units of analysis, and the limitations of forcing complex initiatives into project boxes. With this 10th trend in my countdown list as context, I can be briefer in identifying the remaining things to watch for as you read.

9. Applying complexity understandings. This trend follows from the preceding item but deserves highlighting because of its importance. Projects are closed systems, or at least treated as such in most evaluations, in which boundaries can be established and control can presumably be exercised within those boundaries by both program staff and evaluators. In contrast, complex dynamic interventions, advocacy campaigns, and strategic initiatives are open systems characterized by volatility, uncertainty, and unpredictability—all of which make control problematic. Treating these complicated and complex evaluations like simple projects is inappropriate, ineffective, and insufficient. Indeed, it can do harm by misunderstanding, misconceptualizing, and misrepresenting the very nature of complex change and thereby generating results that are inaccurate and irrelevant. Consider these books on complexity as context for the contributions in this volume. Watch for how complexity is addressed in these pages:

- *Evaluating the Complex: Attribution, Contribution and Beyond*, Kim Forss, Mira Marra, and Robert Schwartz eds. (2011)
- *Evaluation and Turbulent Times: Reflections on a Discipline in Disarray,* Jan-Eric Furubo, Ray C. Rist, Sandra Speer, eds. (2013)
- *Developmental Evaluation: Using Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*, Michael Quinn Patton (2011)
- *Evaluation in the Face of Uncertainty*, Jon Morell (2012)

- ■ *Dealing with Complexity in Development Evaluation: A Practical Approach*, J. Michael Bamberger, Jozef Leonardus Vaessen, Estelle R. Raimondo, eds. (2016)
- ■ *Evaluation Research Methods: Managing the Complexities of Judgment in the Field*, Saville Kushner (2017)

8. Globalization, global interconnectedness, and global systems dynamics. Evaluating global systems dynamics poses a particularly daunting challenge as we learn to view the Earth and the Earth's inhabitants as a holistic, interconnected, and interdependent global system.

Why so much attention to globalization? Consider this recent *New York Times* Business Day report:

> The Fed [the U.S. Federal Reserve] Acts. Workers in Mexico and Merchants in Malaysia Suffer. Rising interest rates in the United States are driving money out of many developing countries, straining governments and pinching consumers around the globe. (Goodman, Bradsher, and Gough 2017)

The agreement on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets has been heralded as a major step forward in global governance toward a sustainable post-2015 development agenda. Certainly, the SDG framework has addressed many of the gaps identified with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by surfacing barriers to sustainability on a systemic level including inequality, consumption patterns, and weak institutional capacity. Nevertheless, the framework remains more sectorally siloed than integrated. Implementation is focused at the nation-state level with few mechanisms to inspire and mobilize innovation within the private sector and civil society to implement alongside national governments.

Poverty, hunger, well-being, education, and ecosystem health are interrelated. The relationships are nonlinear, dynamic, and complex. As you read this book, watch for discussions about, analyses of, and approaches to evaluation of the SDGs that integrate indicators across SDGs and move both down and up scale (down to local levels and up to encompass global dynamics), thereby moving beyond nation-states as the only unit of analysis. By making sense of the interrelationships and interdependencies among and across SDGs, interventions and evaluations will demonstrate sensitivity to and understanding of global systems dynamics.

7. Power, politics, and the realities of evidence. The book's subtitle is "Providing Evidence on Progress and Sustainability." Watch for how the contributors to this book acknowledge and deal with the politicization of evidence.

On April 22, 2017, millions marched for science in 600 cities worldwide. The American Evaluation Association was one of 270 partner organizations that supported the March for Science. The *New York Times* headline on the day of the march read: "Scientists, Feeling Under Siege, March against Trump

Policies" (St. Fleur, 2017). *USA Today* led with: "Marchers for Science Protest 'Alarming' Anti-Science Trends." Anti-science is, ultimately, anti-evaluation evidence. Culturally and politically, the anti-science trends include "alternative facts," "fake news," and a "post-truth" world. In November 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries announced "post-truth" as its Word of the Year:

> **post-truth** *adjective* Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. (Oxford Dictionaries 2016)

Casper Grathwohl, president of the Oxford Dictionaries, explained: "Given that usage of the term hasn't shown any signs of slowing down, I wouldn't be surprised if *post-truth* becomes one of the defining words of our time" (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). Science? Just another perspective. Evaluation? Paperwork. Administrivia. Opinion.

The current anti-science political climate calls us to unite with others engaged in defending and supporting science, creating a united front to the larger world. Science is ultimately about evidence, so how evidence is conceptualized and what constitutes evidence matter a great deal for evaluation. Ironically, some evidence skeptics have become sophisticated at undermining the credibility and utility of evaluation by demanding levels of "proof" that are not possible in complex dynamic systems. Evaluators are having to deal with preponderance of evidence, triangulation, use of mixed methods, and rapid feedback as ways of facing the challenges of producing meaningful and useful results in a timely fashion.

The politics of evidence include speaking truth to power, speaking truth to each other, and empowering those at risk of being left behind to speak their truth. A "post-truth" political world undermines the value of systematic evaluation. In short, evidence is not just about data. It's about how people understand what constitutes meaningful and credible evidence. So, watch how the contributors to this volume take on these issues. The future viability of evaluation as a valued evidence-based profession is at stake.

6. Evaluative thinking embedded in evaluation processes. Methods alone do not ensure rigor. A research design by itself does not ensure rigor. High-quality analytical techniques and procedures do not ensure rigor. Rigor resides in, depends on, and is manifest in *rigorous thinking*—about everything, including methods and analysis. This means valuing intellectual rigor. There are no simple formulas or clear-cut rules about how to do a credible, high-quality analysis. The task is to do one's best to make sense of things. An evaluator returns to the data over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, interpretations, and explanations make sense—if they sufficiently reflect the nature of the phenomena studied. Creativity, intellectual rigor, perseverance, insight—these are the intangibles that go beyond the routine application of scientific and research procedures. These are bedrock elements of rigorous evaluative thinking. Rigorous evaluative thinking combines critical thinking, creative thinking, inferential thinking, and practical thinking. Watch for how evaluative thinking is manifest in the contributions of this book.

5. Evaluation as intervention (process use). The mantra of performance management is that *what gets measured gets done*. Process use concerns how the conduct of an evaluation affects what is done quite apart from the findings of the evaluation. Evaluation is no longer simply about producing an end-of-project report. How evaluation is framed, the questions asked, the data collection priorities established, and the processes for engaging major stakeholders constitute interventions in the development process. As you read, watch for how the presence of evaluation affects development interventions.

4. Evaluation understandings shaping intervention designs. One way evaluation becomes an intervention is by helping conceptualize an intervention's theory of change or strategic approach. Evaluation is no longer simply a back-end activity assessing whether goals are attained. Evaluators are now involved in determining how an intervention is conceptualized—for example, how much attention is given to interactions across and among different SDGs. That's an intervention design issue as much as it is an evaluation issue. Watch for how the examples in this book include evaluators playing a significant role in framing development interventions. A good example is chapter 11 on good governance.

3. Failure as learning. A major source of resistance to evaluation is fear of failure. The preceding items in this list all point toward the increased importance of learning from evaluation findings, and a particularly potent form of learning follows from acknowledging and understanding failures. Engineers without Borders has established a stellar approach to learning from failure by issuing an annual failure report. The politics of development make acknowledging failure, and learning from it, particularly challenging, but also essential. Watch for how the authors in this book identify and address failure, and support learning and adaptation.

2. Transformation. Evaluation has traditionally focused on outcomes and impacts. That is no longer sufficient. Climate change changes everything. The urgency of dealing with the implications of climate change has led to a new focus on transformation. Transformation involves multiple and intersecting interventions that lead to major, deep, systemic, and resilient changes at a large scale, across SDGs, and with urgent timelines. Transformation means big changes happening quickly. Time is of the essence. Scenarios supporting the need for transformation include forecasts that by 2050, under current trends, 20 countries will be gone, 60 cities swamped and unviable, and 1.5 billion people displaced.

      Evaluating transformation is new territory for evaluators, a new and challenging evaluand. It cannot be reduced to targeted indicators. I would argue that transformation is a sensitizing concept that's only meaningful when applied to a given context. Transformation has to be interpreted contextually and dynamically. Thus, transformation should not be subject to narrow measurement or narrow operationalization because it occurs in nonlinear and often unpredictable ways. The problem is not the measurement of

transformation; the problem is actually engaging with multiple perspectives, multiple kinds of data—qualitative and quantitative, case studies, indicators—and global to local scales in an integrated, systemic way to understand what the global patterns of transformation are. Watch for how the emergent agenda of transformation is addressed in this book. More generally, watch for a sense of urgency and scale that goes well beyond project thinking to global transformation.

1. Focus on intended beneficiaries, especially children. I recently reviewed the five-year strategic plan for evaluation of a major international agency. The plan went into great detail about how evaluations would be conducted, criteria of quality, the nature of reports, the timing of findings, and a commitment to meaningful accountability. Intended beneficiaries of development efforts were essentially invisible. The evaluation appeared people-less and heart-less.

A 2015 UNICEF report entitled *Unless We Act Now* makes the case that children will bear the brunt of climate change. The report documents that over half a billion children live in extremely high flood-occurrence zones; nearly 160 million live in high or extremely high drought-severity zones (UNICEF 2015). Since there is a clear scientific consensus that climate change will increase the frequency of droughts, floods, and severe weather events, children are especially in jeopardy globally. Climate change will not affect all equally. Because of the potentially devastating risks in flood and drought zones, and high poverty and low access to essential services such as water and sanitation in those zones, children and families who are already disadvantaged by poverty are likely to experience the greatest effects of climate change.

Part of the responsibility of evaluation should be to highlight and deepen global understanding of effects on real people. If no one is to be left behind, how evaluations are conducted affects that vision. Watch for how this book illuminates the effects of development efforts on intended beneficiaries in ways that make those people and their lives real to readers.

LOOKING FORWARD

I approached reading this book through the lens of how it manifests major changes in the world and corresponding changes in evaluation practice and theory. I've shared the 10 major developments in the evaluation profession that I think will determine the future relevance and utility of our profession. As I noted earlier, your list of what to watch for will not be the same as mine. So, what will you look for? The diverse authors of this volume offer their own priorities and perspectives. In so doing, they challenge all of us to think about how we understand and will engage with *Evaluation for Agenda 2030*.

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