

Futures, Feedback, and Flexibility: Reimagining Public Sector Management and Evaluation in the Time of Polycrisis

*Journal of MultiDisciplinary
Evaluation*
Volume 22, Issue 53, 2026

JMDE
Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation

ISSN 1556-8180
<http://www.jmde.com>

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Background: Public governance is being reshaped by an unfolding polycrisis in which climate breakdown, ecological collapse, conflict, inequality, and democratic erosion interact as complex adaptive systems, generating turbulence across short-, medium-, and long-term time scales. Traditional, compliance-driven evaluation and siloed managerial practices are poorly suited to these conditions, as they tend to be retrospective, slow, and disconnected from real-time decision-making and systems change.

Purpose: To examine how evaluative practice can more effectively support public management in an era of polycrisis, where governments face intertwined climate, ecological, economic, social, and democratic crises and must manage deep uncertainty.

Setting: Evaluation in the public sector, focusing on governmental and municipal systems in South Africa, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the City of Cape Town as illustrative cases of evolving evaluative and management practice.

Findings: Rather than narrow, compliance-oriented project and program evaluation, evaluation should be treated as diverse, embedded practice across the public policy and management cycle. In this way, evaluation can inform major spending decisions, reframe policy to address the polycrisis,

and build institutional capabilities for continuous learning. In addition, transforming evaluative practice toward agility, foresight, systems focus, coproduction, and stronger user voice is essential for adaptive, credible public management under conditions of increasing turbulence.

Intervention: A futures-oriented, systems-focused inquiry drawing on the International Evaluation Academy's 3 Horizons for Evaluation Initiative, combined with four in-depth case studies, to reposition evaluation as an embedded, collaborative, and learning-oriented practice across the policy cycle.

Research Design: Conceptual and practice-based article using a mixed qualitative design: global futures exercise (3 Horizons survey), literature review, AI-assisted thematic analysis, and comparative case analysis across four public sector evaluative systems.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data from 39 key thinkers and practitioners via a 3 Horizons survey, clustered with AI-assisted coding and human synthesis into systems maps; supplemented by documentary evidence and practitioner-authored case narratives for South Africa, Brazil, UK, and Cape Town, analyzed against common research questions.

Keywords: *polycrisis; public management; evaluative practice; systems thinking; futures; learning-oriented evaluation*

This article responds to the changing context of government in a world risking existential destruction and asks how evaluation can contribute more effectively to inform appropriate decision-making. The polycrisis is unfolding with ever greater climate and ecological disasters (Richardson et al., 2023), wars, resurging poverty, and rising authoritarianism while wealth accumulates to ever fewer people (see introduction to this special edition). We are faced with the consequences of our inaction for centuries to come. Public management needs to be more adaptive and flexible and promote regenerative approaches if humanity and other species are to survive. This article targets those interested in the potential of evaluative practice to inform public management in unstable times. It is based on the premise that evaluation can make a significant contribution to addressing the polycrisis, as evaluation has roles in many sectors and in many decisions, and the improvement plans arising from evaluations can significantly influence the design or reform of policies, systems, or programs being evaluated. However, this will require transformation in the way evaluative evidence is embedded and used in the public management process, and so the way evaluation is positioned and practiced.

This article builds on a 3 Horizons for Evaluation Initiative (3HEi) futures process¹ led by the International Evaluation Academy (IEAc) from May 2024 on how evaluation can contribute to addressing the polycrisis, described in depth by Ofir et al. in this special edition. The 3 Horizons methodology was used, as it is relevant for situations with high levels of unpredictability but a fair degree of agency by those in the evaluation field. The polycrisis is human caused—and we can arrest it. A key issue that emerged from the 3HEi work was the need to “*reposition evaluation practice for use in the government policy cycle and management processes.*”

Despite the potential contribution of evaluation, evaluative evidence is not used systematically in decision-making. In many organizations the worlds of managers, planners, and evaluation staff are in separate silos. All too often evaluation is seen as akin to audit—exposing hard truths, avoided rather than learned from, undertaken from a punitive perspective for accountability, rather than part of a learning-focused process. Evaluations may not ask

challenging questions, notably about the underlying paradigms informing interventions, limiting their questioning of the systems which may be contributing to the polycrisis. Sometimes evaluation is at fault—studies may be done *to* clients, not *with* them, leading to little ownership and fear. Sometimes evaluations take too long to be available when decisions need to be made. Responsive evaluative processes feeding into ongoing decision processes are needed, as well as forecasting longer-term trends. This would help to stimulate the demand for evaluations from policymakers, while recognizing that evidence is only one influence on what are usually political decisions.

We widen the thinking beyond evaluations themselves, to include evaluative practices, including evaluative thinking in monitoring,² evaluative workshops, rapid evaluations,³ developmental evaluation, synthesis across evaluations, and the broader processes underpinning the conduct of effective evaluative practice (methods, attitudes, behaviors).

In the article we explore the content of the problems public managers face and their evolution, and how evaluation is adapting. We explore three national cases of evaluation systems—in the UK, South Africa, and Brazil, and the case of a well-developed city in the South (Cape Town). We use these to chart a path for change in evaluative practice that can be more effective in contributing to how public managers respond in times of uncertainty.

Methodology

The core question this article seeks to address is how evaluation needs to adapt to support public management to address the unfolding polycrisis. This draws from the wider 3 Horizons work, which was based on a survey of 39 key thinkers and activists in the evaluation/transformation/policy worlds.

The survey explored the current situation with how evaluation is addressing the polycrisis (Horizon 1), what the aspired future in 2035 was (Horizon 3), and how to get there (Horizon 2). These responses were clustered by a diverse team, and the emerging systems maps were tested in a number of online and physical events. The details

¹ 3 Horizons is a futures process where there is considerable uncertainty about the future but some degree of agency. Horizon 1(H1)=current situation; H3=aspirational future for 2035; H2 is how we get to that aspirational future.

² E.g., see Buckley et al. (2015), who explore the role of evaluative thinking and how it relates to critical thinking.

³ In South Africa these are defined as those taking 6–12 weeks to draft report stage.

of the methodology are in Ofir et al. (2026) and a summary is in Appendix 1. This yielded the area of action needed to reposition evaluation practice for use across the government policy cycle and management processes. In this article we take this forward exploring the following sub-questions, which align with the current and future orientation in the 3 Horizons survey:

- How is the context of public governance changing, and how is future change anticipated, notably regarding the polycrisis?
- How is public management evolving to address the polycrisis?
- How is evaluative practice responding to be able to be of value and used?
- What other ways does evaluative practice need to respond?
- What is needed to make that happen?
- Which roles need to change or need to adapt?

We draw from the literature, the 3 Horizons survey, and four cases. The analysis of the survey combined AI analysis with human review of specific responses and clusters. The four cases include Brazil and South Africa, relatively well-resourced Southern countries with established evaluation and evidence systems; and the UK, a Northern country with a history of production of high-quality evidence but no government-wide evaluation system. Cape Town provides an example of a well-governed and -resourced city in the Global South, with advanced thinking about managing for the future.

The cases are written by people with direct experience of the cases, and the emerging findings were tested in workshops with peers.

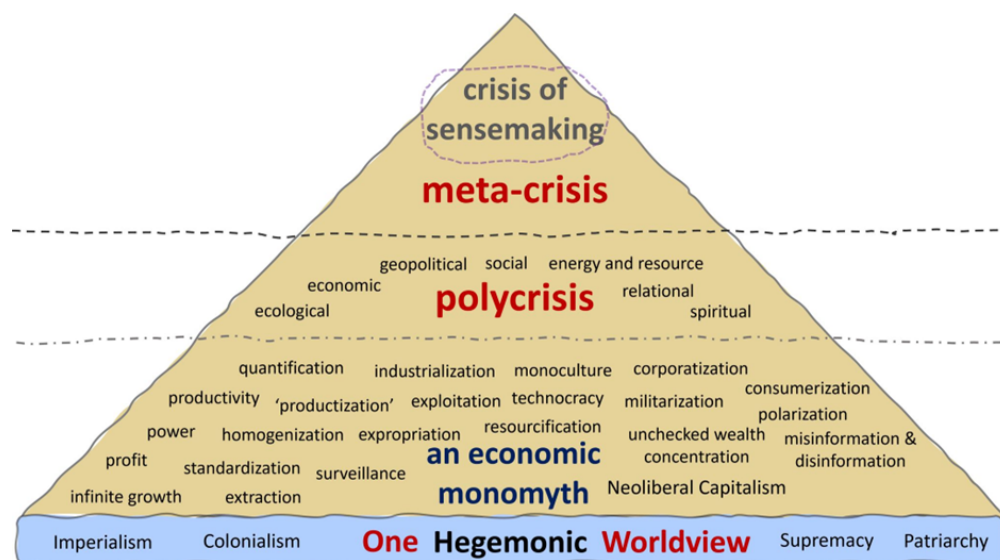
AI was used in a supportive way. The application Perplexity was used to assist with drawing out key lessons, as well as reducing the length of the article. Further AI analysis was done in the 3 Horizons survey, described in Ofir et al., (this issue). Substantive ideas, analysis, and conclusions of this article were developed entirely by the authors.

Context: The Problems Public Managers Face, How These Are Evolving, and How Evaluation Needs to Adapt

The Changing Context for Public Governance with the Polycrisis

The global context for public governance is increasingly turbulent, marked by interaction between climate catastrophes, wars, resurging poverty, concentrated wealth, and systemic crises in governance and public trust. Figure 1 gives a picture of the integrated nature of the polycrisis and how a belief in infinite growth, driven by exploitation, is driving the destructive cycle we are in.

Figure 1. The Poly/Meta-crisis



From *Proteeti*, by S. Chattopadhyay, n.d. (<https://www.pluriversalplanet.in/home>).

The World Economic Forum's 2025 global risk report identifies the top risks likely to create global crises in 2025. These included state-based armed conflict, extreme weather events, geoeconomic confrontation, misinformation and disinformation, social polarization, economic downturn, critical change to earth systems, inequality, and erosion of human rights and/or civic freedoms (WEF, 2025). These reflect unfolding complex adaptive systems (Preiser, 2018).

These risks highlight the urgent need for a transformation in leadership approaches and institutional mindsets, spanning very short-term crises (e.g., wars, disasters, sudden geopolitical ruptures); medium-term shocks (e.g., fiscal constraints, democratic erosion, employment disruption by technology, migration flows, food system vulnerabilities); and long-term system breakdowns and tipping points for both societies and ecosystems.

Most governments must manage these intersecting risks amid short electoral time frames and entrenched political constraints. Evaluative practices need to contribute across these time scales, providing real-time feedback for acute crises and guiding longer-term adaptation, foresight, and evidence-based decision-making in the face of uncertainty.

Strengthening Public Governance to Address the Polycrisis

Crisis can provide an impetus to think differently about policymaking and encourage the embedding of learning as the core evaluative practice. This new thinking has two key sparks for change. First, learning from previous crises is vital to inform the next crisis. Evaluative practice requires an openness to evidence, with trust-fueled learning and reflection building on diverse forms of knowledge (not just powerful policymakers, scientists, or donors). Second, collaborative policymaking and systems leadership are essential to collective learning. Longer-term and enduring complex problems cannot be solved by elite analysts, heroic leaders, or one powerful center of government. This old thinking has contributed to central governments paying lip service to policy coherence and integration while undermining them in practice (Cairney, 2025). Instead, many organizations, across and outside government, need to collaborate continuously—with each other and with stakeholders and citizens—to address problems that transcend traditional sectoral boundaries and boost ownership of a long-term systems change agenda (Cairney & Toomey, 2024, 2025).

Table 1. Multiple Ways to Embed Evaluative Thinking in Everyday Management Practice

Build strong collaborations	Systems leadership	Understanding complex systems
• Take time to deliberate together • Build trust • Generate shared understandings • Share a vision of what success looks like • Engage in shared decision-making for collective action	• Distributed leadership • Facilitate dialogue • Collective sensemaking • Develop local adaptive capacity • Harness collective energy • Real-time shared decision-making	• Identify multiple interacting aspects of policy problems • Acknowledge the uncertain impact of each policy instrument • Understand that policy processes are out of the control of any individual or organization • Watch for tipping points and critical mass

This collaborative principle underpins multiple ways to embed evaluative thinking in everyday management practice (see Table 1). These include longer periods of deliberation to build trust and shared understandings; producing a common sense of what success would look like; supporting informal ways to collaborate; formal decision-making, and “harder” means to mandate change

(Kim & Siddiki, 2018; Heikkila & Gerlak, 2013; Koebeler, 2019; Siddiki & Ambrose, 2023; Dixon et al., 2021; Carey et al., 2014, p. 9). Distributed forms of leadership are needed in complex policymaking systems (“systems leadership”), including “dialogue and sense-making” rather than “commanding” (Drath et al., 2008, p. 639), developing local capacity to adapt to change (Rose

et al., 2024), and “skilful harnessing and holding in creative tension the energy in the wider system, rather than driving through change by sheer force of will and exercise of power” (Ghate et al., 2013, p. 8). A willingness to understand complex adaptive systems is crucial, identifying multiple interacting aspects of policy problems, the uncertain impact of each policy instrument, and policy processes that are out of the control of any individual or organization (Cairney, 2025). These are the types of questions that evaluation can contribute to answering. Evaluation as a function can support the culture shift called for here.

Too often, these opportunities are lost when overshadowed by short-termism, siloed thinking, and turf wars between jurisdictions, sectors, or organizations (Cairney et al., 2024). Policy actors may accept abstract arguments for change while facing more concrete top-down pressures to deliver statutory commitments and without having the “bandwidth” to think and act differently (Bolden et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2023). Hence, facilitators of structural change include describing new approaches to policymaking that most people can understand, reconciling change with powerful incentives to maintain current modes of government, and the capacity to support systems

change (including “political will” and the reallocation of organizational capacity; Cairney, 2025). Meanwhile, more focused activity includes organizational initiatives to connect evidence to policy (e.g., Topp et al., 2018) and the encouragement of energetic individuals able to act as knowledge brokers or the “policy entrepreneurs” able to exploit “windows of opportunity” to connect evidence-informed solutions to high attention to problems (Cairney, 2021; Goldman et al., 2021; Mintrom, 2019).

How Evaluative Practice Needs to Respond to Be of Value and Used

Traditional evaluation, often led by donors, is vulnerable to reductionist paradigms and existing power structures maintaining a destructive status quo (Picciotto, 2023). To address the polycrisis, the fundamental value of evaluation as learning must be recognized and evaluation must build on existing practice where relevant and transform to be agile, future-oriented, and adaptive, supporting managers to move beyond the status quo (see Table 2).

Table 2: Overview of How Evaluation Needs to Be Transformed to Support Systems Change

Traditional project evaluation	Evaluative practice that supports and deepens systems change to address the polycrisis
1. Retrospective, ponderous, takes too long to be responsive	1. Agile, future-oriented, and adaptive
2. An orphan—sometimes carried out, usually externally, resisted and not owned by managers	2. Integrated at all stages of the policy process: conceptualization of interventions, diagnosis, design/planning, implementation, monitoring and learning with shared ownership with managers, and sometimes coproduction
3. Controlled by and serves existing power structures to maintain the status quo	3. Focused on how to address the polycrisis, with strong local voices, recognition of Indigenous rights and rights of Nature
4. Routine compliance reporting	4. Designed and implemented for learning
5. Checklist-standardized evaluation	5. Responsive evaluation focused on leverage points and identifying opportunities and patterns for systems transformation
6. Rushed, simplistic initial problem diagnosis	6. Effective diagnosis addressing root causes
7. Focused on external accountability reporting	7. Focused on supporting and enhancing adaptive management
8. Focused on donor priorities and administrative logic, not local contexts	8. Socially robust, fit for purpose and context, timely, accessible, trusted, and contextualized

Source: Authors, drawn from 3 Horizon maps, www.ieac.global/

Evaluative practice needs to be *integrated at all stages of the policy process*, from the very conceptualization of interventions, right through diagnosis, design, implementation, monitoring, and learning (Goldman & Pabari, 2020, p. 17). However, in practice all too often diagnosis of the problem is rushed to get to action. Even where diagnosis is done planners often do not see the value of evaluative evidence to inform diagnosis of the root causes of the problem they are addressing. Theories of change are essentially a planning tool, but also a very important part of monitoring and evaluation. Meaningful reflective thinking may be missing during implementation, perhaps only undertaken after years have passed, and the opportunity to redirect at an early stage is missed.

Foresight helps us think about uncertainty and the assumptions behind what we do and how we react. To bring this integration it is necessary for the *foresight, planning, and evaluation communities to work together* in real time on interventions, rather than see their roles as separate.

To be used, evaluation must be based on high-quality evidence, but it must also be socially robust (Pisani & Kok, 2017), fit for purpose and context, timely, accessible, trusted, and contextualized (Carden, 2009). Decision makers need to have the motivation, opportunity, and capability to use the evidence (Langer & Weyrauch, 2020). There needs to be a requirement for evidence in the decision-making system, and systems need to be established to encourage evaluation use (Goldman & Pabari, 2020).

In some spheres “independence” and “objectivity” are prized so evidence is not “tainted” by those involved in the intervention, and so evaluations are conducted externally.⁴ However, this often limits learning and incorporation of knowledge from implementors of the system. Coproduction is attracting more interest where the implementation team or commissioners jointly undertake the evaluation with evaluators, or jointly develop parts/recommendations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Graham et al., 2022; DPME, 2022). Developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011) is another option where evaluation is embedded in the management process. Coproduction leads to a higher chance of evaluative evidence being heard, adopted, and used.

Crucially, the incentive system for evaluation (for both evaluators and managers) must shift away from compliance and box-ticking and toward systems thinking, regeneration of the planet, the acceptance of uncertainty and clarification of paradigms and assumptions. Questioning core assumptions allows stakeholders to challenge the status quo; explicitly surfacing assumptions and using them as testable hypotheses can enhance learning.

Addressing the polycrisis requires short-term decisions and anticipating longer-term challenges, for which *foresight* is key. Foresight is not prediction. Rather, it is about seeking our desired futures through changes we can make today (H2). Evaluation and foresight must work in tandem—foresight to map uncertainties and desirable futures, and evaluation to test, learn, and adapt as policies play out amid complexity and unknowns.

Cases

South Africa’s Evaluation System: Illustrating How Evaluative and Evidence Synthesis Practices Can Support Decision-Making and Target the Polycrisis⁵

South Africa’s efforts since 2010 illustrate how evaluative and evidence synthesis practices can support evidence-based policy—especially in responding to complex crises. The national evaluation system (NES) introduced in 2011 was designed to be utilization-focused, stressing departmental ownership, learning rather than punitive approaches, quality assurance, and systematic follow-up (Phillips et al., 2014). It also specifically identifies evaluation contributing across the policy cycle, from diagnosis, design, implementation to achieving outcomes and impacts (DPME, 2011). As of August 2025 over 65 national evaluations have been completed, covering over \$10 billion in government spending.⁶

To strengthen the *demand* for evidence by senior decision makers, a key intervention was a 2.5-day training for the top three levels of the public service in evidence-based policymaking and implementation, with over 350 senior managers trained, including 16 directors general and in some

⁴ In some cases which are considered independent, stakeholders participate in data collection and analysis and also in the construction of recommendations. However, findings are constructed independently.

⁵ This case was written by Ian Goldman, who established South Africa’s national evaluation system and has stayed engaged with it. It was also peer-reviewed by Thokozile Molaiwa, the current head.

⁶ Thokozile Molaiwa, DPME: personal communication.

departments the whole senior management team.⁷ This helped to build trust in the learning focus of the evaluation system, resulting in a number of major evaluations.

Other innovations are *supply-side* interventions to improve the relevance of evaluation for decision-making. These include the introduction of rapid evaluations for timely learning (Mashingaidze, 2023; evidence synthesis to bring broader evidence to bear rather than single studies (DPME, 2014); and spending reviews that combine detailed analysis of how interventions work with expenditure analysis and an assessment of performance to guide decision-making (Engela, 2024).

Another key shift is for evaluation and research commissioners to see themselves as *knowledge brokers*, facilitating the supply, demand for, and use of evaluations (Goldman et al., 2021). There has been considerable work within the department of planning, monitoring and evaluation (DPME) to address this (Dayal, 2023).

Another specific innovation was to make evaluations explicitly consider the polycrisis. DPME, with the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA), have developed two *evaluation criteria* for the polycrisis—on transformative equity⁸ and climate and ecosystems health⁹—to apply in all evaluations. However, this is yet to be taken up widely.

A revised national evaluation policy framework (NEPF) is as of December 2025 on its way to Cabinet for approval. This revision is seeking to strengthen recognition across government of the importance of evaluation, particularly where fiscal consolidation is leading to hard choices. It is also drawing from work on decolonizing national evaluation systems undertaken with the IEAc, seeking to strengthen the role of users and communities affected by interventions, within both evaluations and the evaluation system, which has emerged as a key issue for evaluations to be responsive to the needs of the polycrisis (Goldman et al., 2024).

This work is still emergent. Evaluative units must deepen capacity to apply the transformative equity / climate and ecosystems health criteria and to undertake rapid evaluation. Meanwhile planners and program managers need to integrate evaluation during diagnosis, design, and implementation

phases, as well as in assessing outcomes and impacts.

*Supporting Evaluation in the Brazilian Federal Government*¹⁰

The National School of Public Administration (ENAP) is a federal institution under the Brazilian government. As a school of government, ENAP is primarily responsible for the professional development and training of civil servants and policymakers, also functioning as a policy-oriented research center, an innovation hub, and a governmental think tank. ENAP plays a strategic role as a knowledge broker within the federal administration, promoting the use of evidence and expertise in policymaking.

ENAP's policy evaluation service in Brazil uses a demand-driven, collaborative approach to build evaluative capacity within the federal government. From 2021 to July 2025, it has conducted 89 evaluations with 32 governmental units across diverse policy areas, advancing coproduction and collaboration with civil servants and, where appropriate, external actors. This recognizes that evaluation occurs amid political interests and institutional constraints, not as a neutral, technical process (Cairney, 2016; Chelimsky, 1987; Olejniczak, 2017; Weiss, 1979, 1988, 1993).

The policy evaluation service's work is structured around institutional arrangements, the characteristics of the evaluation processes, and organizational and individual capacities. The service focuses on evaluation process design and capacity strengthening as concrete ways to promote the use of evaluation.

The service uses collaborative, theory-based approaches (Chen, 1990; Rogers et al., 2000; Rogers, 2008; Weiss, 1997) that actively involve civil servants, technical teams, and, when appropriate, civil society representatives and beneficiaries in defining evaluation questions, interpreting results, and, in some cases, formulating recommendations. This coproduction of knowledge turns evaluation into a reflective and dialogical process in which evaluators and stakeholders not only value programs but build deeper understandings of how and why policies work (or not) in real-world contexts (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018). This approach has proved to be

⁷ Equivalent to permanent secretaries.

⁸ <https://www.samea.org.za/wp-content/uploads/Evaluation-Guideline-Transformative-Equity.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.samea.org.za/wp-content/uploads/CEH-Guideline.pdf>

¹⁰ This case was written by Tamille Dias and Rafael Ferrari, who both work in ENAP's policy evaluation and evidence unit.

particularly well-suited in the face of the complexity and volatility of the political environment in which the policy process is embedded.

From an evaluation theory perspective, challenges to deliver societal goals implies the need to recognize multiple values and evaluative criteria (Teasdale, 2021), which should be coconstructed with a broad range of stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of policies and programs. Hence, the policy evaluation service proposes a collaborative evaluation design that is politically attuned and grounded on trust-building, dialogue, and shared responsibility, key conditions for ensuring that the evidence produced is used (Cousins et al., 2013; Fetterman, 2017, 2024; Hansen & Vedung, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2012; Rodríguez-Campos, 2012).

One of the key lessons learned is that roles must be reshaped. Evaluators should not act as neutral technicians, but rather as facilitators of critical processes of knowledge building; policymakers and technical teams must create space for learning and adaptation through evaluative practices; and decision makers should acknowledge the strategic value of evaluative thinking. To this end, the policy evaluation service promotes practical learning environments—learning by doing—in which civil servants actively participate in the evaluation process, developing analytical skills and critical thinking.

The experience of the policy evaluation service embraces evaluation as a tool for learning and governance. By combining methodological rigor with sensitivity to the political and institutional realities of policymaking and evaluation processes, the service offers a promising pathway to making evaluation not only relevant and more likely to be used, but also resilient in the face of contemporary complexity and challenges (Dias et al., in press).

*Embedding Better Standards of Evaluation Practice, Including Evidence Use, Across UK Government*¹¹

The UK system is associated with electoral incentives towards short-termism, partisan approaches to success and failure, fragmented government and siloed departments, and a public sector containing organizations focused almost entirely on delivering their own statutory commitments while facing cuts to budgets (Cairney et al., 2024). The gulf between collaborative

systems-thinking rhetoric versus everyday practices is stark (Goss, 2021, p. 15).

Public sector leadership is seeking to improve coordination from the center, giving greater coherence across departments and raising standards—in effect, pre-positioning better to address economic downturns and health and environmental crises. Foresight studies are commissioned to help position action for the future.

The UK government supports multiple initiatives which demonstrate the role of evaluation as fostering learning or understanding, rather than narrow forms of audit and accountability. Examples include the public policy design network and policy profession training focused on developing capacity in whole-systems approaches, backed by a National Audit Office (2021) commitment to match evaluation to such ideas; and reforms such as integrated care systems (England) driven by the need to join up public service activity and promote “systems leadership” (Timmins, 2015). Further, from 2021, the cabinet office / treasury-sponsored evaluation task force (ETF) began to coordinate evaluation practice across government departments, to improve evaluation standards and the use of evidence. There has been a rise in quality embedded evaluation from a low base. In 2019 the prime minister's implementation unit (PMIU) found 8% of the spend on the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP) had high-quality impact evaluation plans in place; by 2023–2024 around one-third of projects had robust evaluation plans in place.

The ETF has no overarching polycrisis role nor narrative. Still, it can use levers or resources to help transform evaluation, including:

- *Guidance*, provided via the ETF-owned Magenta Book (evaluation) and treasury-owned Green Book (appraisal and evaluation), plus a supplementary guide (2020, p. 17) which encourages multiple stakeholders to be involved in a continuous learning process in a complex system.
- *Evidence generation*, via the network of 13 What Works Centres (WWCs) which generate research evidence and bring together evaluation professionals.
- *The Evaluation Registry*, a depository for all planned, live, and completed government evaluations from April 2024 onward.

¹¹ This case was written by Professor Paul Cairney, who works extensively around UK and Scottish policy processes, and Bridget Dillon, formerly head of

evaluation profession, in the UK's Department for International Development.

- *The Evaluation Accelerator Fund (EAF)*, supporting evaluation with a tender system to offer 1-year grants across government and charities in England to transform understanding of the impact of activity in priority policy areas.

These developments take place during a period of flux in which there are competing drivers: to recognize the polycrisis and encourage new ways of working and learning, but also to adapt to major government resource constraints which often limit managers to routine core business, while emphasizing audit and accountability in relation to many high-profile major projects coming under public scrutiny for implementation delays.

Meanwhile, the future tends to be considered through the UK Government Foresight Program, which is located within the Government Office for Science, in the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). The direct engagement between foresight and evaluation is not explicit.

Some government departments or units now employ evidence brokers with the potential to connect to knowledge brokerage (e.g., via What Works Centres¹²), while professional societies such as the UK Evaluation Society and Charities Evaluation Working Group have become visibly more active.

Evaluative practices need to be supported by major structural reforms that fundamentally alter

incentives toward collaboration and long-term action. Foresight, planning, and evaluation need to be brought closer together and work collaboratively.

Commissioners of evaluation need to continue to think beyond the evaluation itself into the use of the evidence it generates. A positive step is the introduction of department directors of analysis (DDAns)—senior civil servants who oversee evaluation delivery, prioritization, staffing, and budgets within their departments. The learning gained by these new designated roles needs to be captured and used to contribute to transformational understanding of evaluation and its greater impact.

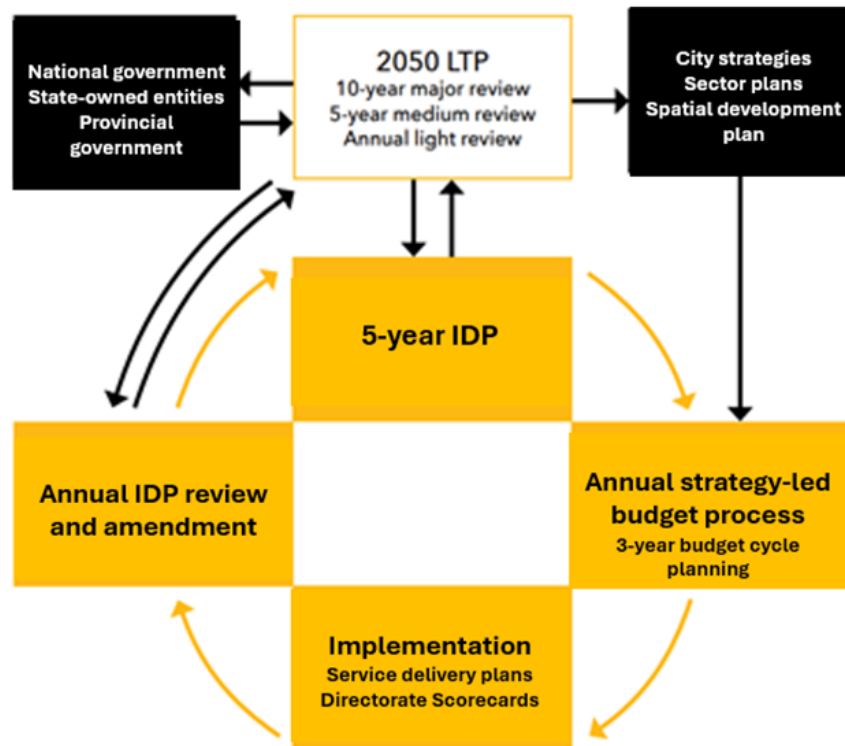
Navigating the Polycrisis: Integrating Evaluation into Adaptive Planning in the City of Cape Town, South Africa¹³

All local governments in South Africa are required to adopt an integrated development plan (IDP)—a 5-year, multisectoral plan that guides municipal priorities, budgets, and services. This case explores how the City of Cape Town (CoCT) is integrating evaluative thinking, evaluations, data, and strategic foresight into a continuous planning and performance cycle (see Figure 2).

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>

¹³ This case was written by Gareth Morgan, executive director of the Future Planning and Resilience Directorate, City of Cape Town.

Figure 2. An Iterative Cycle of Learning and Adjustment



Note: Adapted from “Cape Town 2050—Long-Term Plan,” by City of Cape Town, 2025, p. 5

While the IDP is a useful tool for short-to-medium-term planning, it has limitations when confronting long-term, systemic shifts such as climate change, etc. To overcome these constraints, in 2025 the City introduced a 25-year long-term plan (LTP), connecting multiple 5-year IDPs (City of Cape Town, 2025). The LTP articulates long-range goals and desired outcomes, such as sustainability, economic resilience, and inclusive growth, through time-bound interventions within successive IDPs.

The relationship between the LTP and IDP is managed through an annual review process that integrates evaluative thinking, performance reflection, and real-time analysis to amend the 5-year IDP. This is based on a thorough reassessment of economic trends; progress on performance metrics; land use and population change, using updated spatial and demographic data; emerging risks, including new climate modeling and infrastructure vulnerabilities; and technology developments. This process contributes to the IDP being dynamic and evidence-based, but also aligns municipal action with the LTP’s longer-term direction. Performance outcomes are continuously

adjusted based on resourcing, feasibility, and strategic fit.

A critical success factor in Cape Town’s adaptive approach is its investment in internal capability—specifically the establishment of the Future Planning and Resilience Directorate, which aligns planning, foresight, evaluation, and implementation processes across the City’s 12 directorates. The directorate holds a unique strategic position that allows it to manage centrally and oversee key corporate processes. Among its most important functions are:

- *Infrastructure planning coordination:* Ensuring that each sectoral directorate develops infrastructure plans using common planning assumptions, promoting coherence and comparability.
- *Performance management oversight:* Cascading strategic deliverables from the LTP and IDP through directorate, departmental, and executive directorate scorecards, reviewing prior-year performance to recalibrate future targets.

- *Economic analysis:* Deep analysis of local and macroeconomic indicators to inform policy choices and investment prioritization.
- *Social research:* Including Cape Town's household survey, capturing disaggregated community-level data to inform spatial targeting and policy development and some evaluations.
- *Business improvement:* Industrial engineers collaborate with other City departments to streamline internal processes and workflows and address structural bottlenecks.
- *Data science and AI development:* Creating dashboards, analytic models, and AI tools that support decision-making across departments.
- *Innovation and customer satisfaction:* An annual survey assessing overall satisfaction for over 40 services offered by the City, providing a crucial feedback loop into business improvement initiatives and planning.
- *Risk management:* The risk management unit conducts ongoing scanning and scenario planning across departments, producing plans to mitigate vulnerabilities.

By colocating these highly specialized but interdependent functions within a single directorate, the City creates opportunities for cross-pollination and synthesis. Products such as dashboards, survey results, economic forecasts, and risk assessments are integrated into the annual planning and budget cycle, creating a

multidimensional feedback system that supports strategic agility and operational focus. However the directorate does not at present undertake formal evaluative studies systematically.

Cape Town's model demonstrates that institutional capability is a prerequisite for adaptive governance. Without a central entity like the Future Planning and Resilience Directorate, equipped with analytical expertise, coordination authority, and evaluative power, such a system would likely fragment or become overly bureaucratic.

Analysis

The comparison of the cases was undertaken by one author drawing from cases against the research questions, checked by the case authors. By design, the cases differ, and so we are drawing different lessons from each case.

In all four cases we see contexts of uncertainty, political and economic volatility, active disinformation campaigns, and vulnerability to climate change. Geopolitical seesawing is impacting the potential to forecast, and yet climate and ecosystems breakdown is proceeding apace. There is a need to respond to short-term crises and at the same time try to establish a basis for longer-term sustainability. Table 1 compares the cases against the main questions that we identified.

Table 3: Comparison of the Four Cases Against the Analytical Questions

Element	South Africa	Brazil	UK	City of Cape Town
Key features of the case.	Monitoring and evaluation driven by dep't of planning, M&E (DPME). Using evaluation and evidence synthesis to drive evidence-based policymaking since 2010.	Unit in ENAP focusing on evidence and evaluation and its use of coproduction, collaboration, and politically sensitive approaches.	Using central government initiatives to drive and embed use of evaluation for evidence-based policymaking.	Foresight and planning capability established in central unit to bring futures thinking, uniformity, and control to cycle of planning and performance management.
How is context changing, and how is future change being anticipated?	Political instability with a coalition government, and potential social unrest. Deteriorating fiscal situation. Some	Political context increasingly complex and volatile. By recognizing diverse forms of knowledge and engaging stakeholders in	Political context gives rise to short-termism and partisan approaches. Government siloed, organizations focus on delivering their	Changing context used to propose changes to the 5-year plan. By integrating evaluative thinking with long-term planning and

Element	South Africa	Brazil	UK	City of Cape Town
	work on a just transition.	coproduction, the service strengthens institutional capacity to adapt and respond to change.	statutory commitments while facing cuts to budgets. Future change focused on doing what is being done, better.	adaptive cycles, the city keeps its strategies dynamic and evidence-based.
Evolution of management/ leadership in the public sector to address the polycrisis.	Main focus on restoring state capability, rather than adaptive management for the polycrisis. Requirement in plans to report on what's being done to address a just transition.	Permanent, capable public service provides continuity, institutional memory, and the capacity to generate long-term public value beyond political cycles. Addressing the polycrisis requires further strengthening of the civil service.	Little explicit focus on the polycrisis.	Future Planning and Resilience Directorate established to deliver short-, medium- and long-term planning responsive to the polycrisis. Required to review context and update 5-year plan.
How is evaluative practice responding to be able to be of value and used?	Focus on evaluation and evidence use, including knowledge brokering. Introducing evidence synthesis, rapid syntheses, performance and spending reviews, rapid responsive evaluations for emerging policy priorities. Development of evaluation criteria to address equity and climate and ecosystems health.	Evaluative practice acknowledging the knowledge of public servants and shifting from a technical, external approach to a collaborative, politically attuned process. Engaging managers and other stakeholders throughout the evaluation fosters trust, relevance, and shared ownership—key to ensure evidence is valued and used.	Greater engagement across professional evaluation associations in UK; use of “evidence brokers” in some government departments; establishment of ETF to raise standards in evaluation across UK government.	Annual, institutionalized review of internal and external context, using internally produced products (economic reports, climate modeling, customer satisfaction surveys, etc. Cyclical evaluative process keeps the City responsive to evolving challenges while maintaining long-term strategic alignment.
Other ways evaluative practice needs to respond to be of value and used.	Promoting more diverse evaluative practices, strengthening evaluative thinking in monitoring and user voice in evaluations and the evaluation system, and capacity to use new	Embrace methodological and epistemological diversity and promote participatory, reflective processes that build shared understanding and support adaptive use.	Need to respond to context with shorter delivery time.	Further integrate real-time adaptive mechanisms, allowing for quicker responses to emerging crises. More flexible, decentralized feedback loops to help incorporate

Element	South Africa	Brazil	UK	City of Cape Town
	evaluation criteria. Also need for evaluations to focus more on systems, and how those systems need to change to address the polycrisis.			local-level insights more swiftly into strategic planning. Increased capacity in data analytics, community engagement, and real-time decision-making, investing in technology to support agile evaluative methods.
What is needed to make that change in evaluative practice and use happen?	Collaboration with National Treasury to strengthen the use of evaluation and other evidence in planning and budgeting. Strengthening the cross-government coalition to support evaluation.	Building trust, promoting relationships, and engaging users throughout the process key to enabling meaningful change in evaluative practice and use. When evaluation is grounded in dialogue, proximity, and shared responsibility, it becomes more relevant, legitimate, and likely to inform decision and action.	Incentives need to be oriented toward collaboration and long-term action.	Adequate resources should be allocated to build local-level evaluation infrastructure, empowering frontline actors with tools and training.
Which roles need to change or need to adapt?	Planners and managers to take on responsibility for initiating evaluative work across the policy cycle. Evaluation staff need enhanced capacity to undertake system-focused evaluations	All roles must adapt to the political nature of evaluation. Evaluators should act as facilitators of reflective, collaborative processes rather than neutral technicians. Policymakers and program teams must be recognized as key knowledge holders and active participants in generating and using evaluation insights.	Planners and evaluators need to collaborate. Commissioners need to set evaluations with a look to longer-term future.	Planners, evaluators, and sector leaders should embrace more collaborative and flexible approaches, with increased responsibility for real-time data integration. Data analysts should work more closely with operational teams to create actionable insights, and leadership must foster a culture of adaptability and continuous learning

Element	South Africa	Brazil	UK	City of Cape Town
				across all levels of all directorates in the organization.

Changes in Public Management

In all cases we see the *beginnings of adaptive management*. All cases report efforts to combine short-term agility with long-term vision, as with rapid evaluations in South Africa during COVID, and cycles of annual reflection and adaptation with Cape Town's 25-year and rolling 5-year plans. However, this is not yet explicitly seen as a core competence of managers.

Not much emerges from these cases around how public managers can understand their work using a *complex adaptive systems approach*, rather than the siloed programs and services which are typical of machine-based bureaucracies. There are examples in the literature; for example:

Gateshead in the UK is experimenting with the creation of a bespoke public service response to the strengths and needs of individual citizens. This work is predicated on learning driving improvement using a learning cycle based on what is effective, efficient and sustainable. The starting point for the change was the appointment of a new Director of Public Service Reform, with a background in systems change. The work focused on a change in the relationship between providers of the service. It sought to create change in the relationship between different providers of service by seeking to move beyond service silos and the limits of practice imposed by professional standards, and instead create a "whole person" response which different people contributed to. (Lowe & Plimmer, 2019, p. 68)

The South African and Brazilian evaluation systems demonstrate *collaborative, cross-stakeholder approaches and distributed leadership* through their evaluative systems and practices, which strengthens institutional learning. Cape Town's planning integrates consultation and stakeholder engagement through regular town hall meetings, surveys, and stakeholder participation committees and capacity and to shift evaluations away from punitive uses toward shared learning.

How Evaluative Practice Is Responding

South Africa *embeds evaluation across the full policy cycle*—including diagnostic, design, and implementation stages. Cape Town integrates evaluative reflection as an annual cycle tied to its planning processes, as well as real-time responses supported by economic, technological, and demographic data.

Institutions are *building internal capability for generating and using evidence and learning* in central units. DPME in South Africa, Cape Town's Future Planning and Resilience Directorate, and Brazil's ENAP all build *evaluative capacity across stakeholders* and function as *knowledge brokers*, in Cape Town's case integrating planning and foresight. The UK has the central government initiative of the Evaluation Task Force (ETF) to raise standards and coordinate evaluation across government. UK departments have developed "evidence brokers" and the appointment of department directors of analysis (DDAn), though application is uneven and incentives remain a barrier to structural change. In this way we see examples of creating the conditions for the use of evidence to influence decision-making.

South Africa and Brazil are building evaluative capacity more widely in government through *collaborative learning by doing*. The Brazilian and South African cases focus on *coproduction*, involving stakeholders actively in defining evaluation questions and interpreting results, and in South Africa, sometimes in undertaking of rapid evaluations. In South Africa and the UK, stakeholders are involved in steering committees, and in all stages of the evaluation and in South Africa in the development of improvement plans.

In South Africa / Brazil we see a big focus on using *evaluation for learning*, although not in the wider public management system. South Africa's NES promotes follow-up and improvement plans arising from evaluations, which require using evaluation findings.

In terms of *diversifying evaluative practices*, South Africa has innovated with rapid evaluations during the COVID-19 pandemic, spending reviews, evaluative workshops, and using evaluation criteria to focus on the polycrisis. The NEPF 2025 also encourages using systems thinking and foresight tools in evaluation, drawing directly from the Three

Horizons work. Both South Africa and Brazil are supplementing traditional methods with evidence synthesis for agile policy responses. Cape Town's directorate leverages a wide array of analytic tools, from dashboards to household and customer surveys, for integrative learning and performance improvement.

The *voice of users* is included in evaluations in Brazil and in South Africa and the UK through steering committees, but users' voices need to be enhanced. This is critical for the system changes needed to address the polycrisis. In the Brazilian government there are other participatory units, especially in planning, but these do not link with evaluation units. In South Africa the need to strengthen the voice and power of users and those affected by interventions has been recognized both for the evaluation system as a whole and in individual evaluations and has been addressed in the revised National Evaluation Policy Framework.¹⁴ COCT does considerable consultation, with town hall meetings each year to discuss the budget and implementation priorities; an annual customer satisfaction survey including focus groups across different demographic groups; and stakeholder committees around infrastructure construction.

The Cape Town case is notable for *building real foresight capacities into evaluative practice* through its foresight and resilience unit with 70 technical staff, while South Africa's national plans now routinely incorporate scenario analysis and

long-term visioning. However, evaluations in South Africa do not yet routinely include foresight work.

Emerging Lessons and Changes Needed

Leaders are having to work within the volatile, uncertain, and complex environments linked to the polycrisis. Figure 3 summarizes some of the emerging lessons and changes needed in public management to address this.

They need to develop *adaptive, resilient management approaches* that can handle interconnected adaptive and dynamic systems and emerging crises across different timescales—from short-term disasters to long-term sustainability challenges. This will put significant pressure on the *capacity and culture* in the public sector to use evidence, understand the deeper systems, adapt, and learn, with the quality of relationships to cope in a crisis. UNDP Futures Lab/ISC indicate that states must:

exercise bold leadership to shift mindsets and challenge the status quo. Leaders must actively cultivate a culture that is sensitive to context, embraces foresight, challenges dominant paradigms, and drives openness to innovative and novel solutions. Building such a culture is essential to dismantling outdated norms, overcoming systemic barriers, and enabling future-oriented action. (2025, p. 33)

Figure 3. Changes to Public Management to Manage in Uncertainty



The challenges we face are systemic, with interconnected root causes linked to the

exploitative and extractive mindsets and values underlying the myth of unlimited growth in a finite

¹⁴ Thokozile Molaiwa: personal communication

world (Picciotto, 2023). As Kania et al. (2018) suggest, system change requires building relationships (both social and ecological), changing power dynamics, mindsets, and values. (Askar et al., 2026; Chaplowe et al., 2026). Treating evaluation as neutral implies maintaining the economic and social status quo. There are many examples of evaluations based on values, while Horizon 2 in the 3 Horizons maps brings out the need for regenerative mindsets and values, which can help bring the insight to evaluations of how interventions and systems can be transformed so they are regenerative.

Key are the *incentives* in the public sector, the “carrots, sticks and sermons,” both for managers and within the evaluation field (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 2011). New incentives for learning, inquiry, and using evidence must be created, shifting away from accountability and toward systems understanding and adaptive management, building alliances with ministries of finance to support the use of evaluative evidence for planning and budgeting.

Systemic challenges and interconnected crises highlight the limits of siloed approaches. A focus on systems and *system-level evaluations* is critical to achieving a just and sustainable transformation (Askar et al., this issue; Chaplowe et al., this issue). An innovation in South Africa are new evaluation criteria focused squarely on the polycrisis—addressing transformative equity and climate and ecosystems health, and so pushing interventions to think about the wider systems within which they interact.

To respond to short-term as well as long-term crises requires *effective government systems which have the flexibility to respond*, including the early warning capability and foresight methods that can anticipate both short-term and long-term challenges. CoCT is a good example of this. Interestingly the City does not use formal evaluation studies systematically, while it does use systematically evaluative practices drawing on data, research, performance management processes, etc., to inform this short- and long-term decision-making.

For public managers to respond appropriately they need *data and evaluative evidence embedded across the policy cycle*—in agenda setting, diagnosis, selection of interventions, design of interventions, implementation, and to see outcomes and impacts. This is explicit in the South African evaluation system, but not yet across public

management more widely. The link between planning, monitoring, and evaluation needs to be much stronger.

A *diverse range of evaluative practices* are needed at these different stages. Full-scale evaluations typically take 6–12 months and often longer, and so are relevant for medium- to longer-term plans and programs. We see in the cases other evaluative practices, including use of data, research, rapid evaluations, and rapid evidence synthesis. Additional methods can be relevant for embedding evaluative thinking across the organizational cycle, including developmental evaluation and experimentation with effective monitoring and learning processes incorporating evaluative thinking.

Evaluations must shift from a dominant accountability and retrospective focus to driving *real-time and prospective learning*. Cultural change is needed within both management and evaluation communities, including development of facilitative and knowledge-brokering roles to assist the demand, supply, and cocreative efforts to inform government decision-making. Once again, these are key competences required in program managers and evaluation staff (Goldman et al., 2021).

The current *incentive system* for evaluation internationally focuses largely around accountability to donors and public managers, for internal/bureaucratic needs. Used in this way, evaluation overlaps with the audit function. To engage with the complex adaptive systems which typify the polycrisis, incentives to conduct and use evaluations must shift toward systems’ understanding, sustainability and learning—emphasizing foresight, adaptive management, addressing uncertainty and assumptions, and downward accountability to citizens, users, and those affected.

Users and those affected by interventions need a strong voice and power in public services, involvement in design and evaluation, with the power to demand information and transparency of process. In evaluations, they must be able to challenge how interventions are conceived, planned, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. In general, all the cases show very limited citizen involvement in decision-making, let alone in evaluative processes, and this is an area where much work is needed.¹⁵ However, effective participation costs effort and time.

¹⁵ For example, the ladder of participation refers to a range of levels of participation from manipulation to tokenistic approaches (informing, consulting, placating)

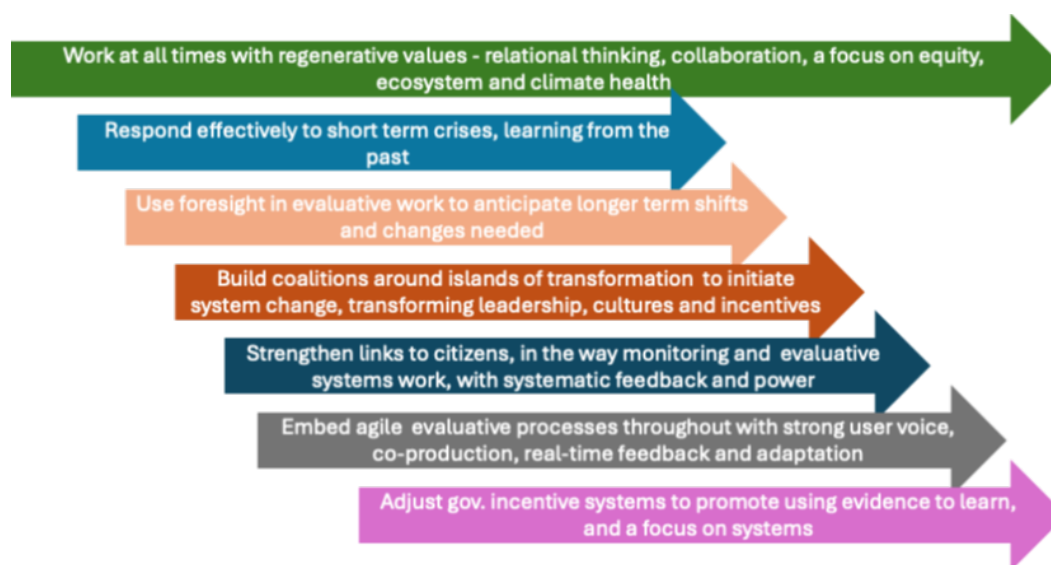
through to genuine citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control; Arnstein, 1969).

For all this to happen *functions and roles* need to change. Evaluation needs to be explicitly recognized as an integral part of the governance system. Planners, managers, evaluators, and analysts need to break institutional silos and collaborate systematically, fostering a culture of learning and adaptive management, with institutional mechanisms and evidence broker roles that ensure evidence is heard and acted upon across organizational decision cycles. Upward accountability needs to be assessed elsewhere, e.g., by audit functions, while downward accountability to citizens is key. Much greater emphasis is needed on evaluation's role and value in generating learning, and it should be embedded appropriately as a strategic function in the government institutional hierarchy.

Conclusions

As Figure 3 shows, transforming public management for the polycrisis era requires public managers to be able to respond effectively to short-term crises and anticipate larger scale changes. Figure 4 looks at the changes in evaluative practice. This requires transformative, embedded evaluative practice, with strong user voice, while in many countries the links of the state with citizens have frayed. Evaluation must be re-imagined as an integral, participatory, and adaptive system function that supports both learning and decision-making throughout the policymaking cycle, responding to short- and long-term policy needs.

Figure 4: Transforming Evaluative Practice to Support Effective Public Management in the Polycrisis Era



Realizing this change will require government leadership, cultures, and systems of incentives to evolve, often counter to established political and organizational interests. Success depends on building relationships, empowering users, challenging entrenched mindsets, and developing capacities for learning, systems thinking, and knowledge brokerage.

While we are seeking a major transformation in the world to reset and solve all these problems, “small-scale, incremental changes (can) contribute to transformative change for a just and sustainable

world when they address the underlying causes.”¹⁶ Integrating decision support functions with planning (e.g., Cape Town); making evaluation more agile (e.g., rapid evaluations in South Africa); fostering coproduction (e.g., Brazil); promoting systems approaches, building knowledge brokering capacity (e.g., UK); strengthening user voice (e.g., Gateshead); and mainstreaming equity and climate concerns (e.g., South Africa) can be pockets of the future that, if amplified, support transformative adaptation.

¹⁶ Presentation by Karen O'Brien on IPBES Transformative Change Assessment, Transformations Community Conference, Johannesburg, 19 August 2025.

For this transformation to succeed governments need to incentivize values, mindsets, competences, and institutional arrangements in both public management and evaluation to promote a more just, regenerative, and resilient world.

Appendix. Summary of 3HEI Methodology

The 3 Horizons methodology is an approach to use when the future is very uncertain but there is a level of agency to bring about a preferred future. The methodology includes identifying Horizon 1 (the current situation), Horizon 3 (the aspirational future, in this case for 2035), and Horizon 2 (how we get there). The article by Ofir et al. in this special edition has more details on the overall 3 Horizons work and results.

An in-depth questionnaire with 13 deep questions was sent to over 100 carefully selected individuals across all regions working in the evaluation field, as policy advisors using evaluation evidence, and as professionals and academics working in the public management, civil society and transformation fields. There were 39 in-depth and very rich responses. These were initially analyzed using AI to separate out complex responses into separate thematic issues and given unique identifiers. These were then grouped manually into clusters at each horizon level, and clusters were then grouped as well to create systems maps, with connectors. Where responses were actually relating to another horizon, the responses were moved to the relevant horizon. All responses can be tracked back to the original responses. Eighteen diverse analysts participated in the grouping, a cocreation session involving 42 people participated in analysis at the SAMEA Conference of October 2024, and the groupings were checked by the core group of eight to nine people driving the 3 Horizons process.

The emerging maps were tested at a number of events—with respondents, with Academy Friends, with ClimateSMILE foundations, and physically at the IDEAS Conference. There were then specific technical inputs to strengthen consideration of Indigenous rights, rights of Nature and gender. The subsequent maps were then tested in a gLocal session in June 2025, and at two webinars timed to reach across the world on 3 and 4 July, the latter held with a range of regional partners including EvalPartners, IOCE, regional VOPEs, EvalIndigenous, and EvalforEarth.

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