

Where Next for Evaluation? Navigating the Polycrisis Through Three Horizons

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Background: In this time of polycrisis and dwindling SDG interest, large-scale systemic transformations are urgently needed. For the evaluation field to remain relevant, it has to transform in order to support transformation.

Purpose: A call to action, based on an extensive consultative, Three Horizons-framed effort to reimagine an evaluation field fit for this time—and how to get there.

Setting: The global field of evaluation

Intervention: Transformational pathways identified toward an aspirational vision for the evaluation field, with a global partnership established to advance such action in tandem with the Global Evaluation Agenda 2.0.

Research Design: Innovative, rigorous application of the Three Horizons foresight framework within a living systems view of the evaluation field.

Data Collection and Analysis: Extensive, systematic Three-Horizons-based consultation, analysis and verification, including testing of AI as support in such processes, and with results verified against an established systems transformation framework.

Findings: At least four major transition pathways are required to reposition the evaluation field, to be given momentum by visionary, inspirational leadership and committed catalysts for action.

Keywords: *evaluation field; polycrisis; Three Horizons; transformation pathways.*

Prelude: An Invitation

Act as if you live in the early days of a better world.

—Alasdair Gray

We invite you to travel with us, and to move from reflection to action, as we share our year-long exploration of how evaluation could evolve to meet the demands of our time. Months of deep dialogue and analysis, enriched by contributions from around the world, offered a moment to pause and reflect deeply as we traced how evaluation might become more future-fit.

At the heart of this journey sits the Three Horizons (3H) foresight framework,¹ enhanced and complemented by several additional framings and techniques. It compelled us to imagine and aspire, to stretch our gaze to the long term, to see the field of evaluation as a living system,² and to hold multiple time frames at once—revealing what serves us now, sensing what is emerging with transformative potential, and naming the legacy systems that constrain or no longer serve us alongside those that we might adapt, maintain, or amplify.

We do not offer final solutions. Instead, we share a collaboratively tested synthesis drawing from voices of and in the field—still evolving, yet collective and generative. The pathways we propose are neither fixed nor exhaustive, yet they carry the resonance of the many voices who participated in this process, calling for fundamental shifts in how evaluation is conceived, perceived and practiced. We have been reminded that meaningful change in the field cannot be achieved through technical adjustment alone. Reimagining begins by clarifying evaluation's purpose and positioning so that it benefits society at every level, from community initiatives to national policy to global governance. It also means recognizing that evaluation is always rooted in multiple forms of knowledge, and in our relationships with knowledge, time, place, self, and one another—and making space for complexity, humility, and hope.

This article is both a product of that reimagining process and a call to action. It tells the story of how one initiative aims to help forge a field

fit for times that demand it most. Through this effort we have identified a future to which we can aspire, one that asks us to strengthen our agency and take part in helping it unfold.

It invites all of us who want to contribute to a future that ensures an equitable and safe space for humanity and the rest of Nature within planetary boundaries: Let us all work together to envision and help shape evaluation as a practice that does not merely keep pace with change, but helps bring forth a more safe, just, responsive, and regenerative future.

The Problem—and Our Response

Our belief in the future is what gives us the power to act in the present.

—William James

The world stands at a crossroads, and so does evaluation. Humanity now confronts an accelerating polycrisis turning permacrisis: a situation where multiple geopolitical, environmental, social, and technological crises, shocks, and violent conflicts interact and compound one another into a state of chronic instability and uncertainty. At the heart of the polycrisis is environmental destruction coupled with geopolitical strife, as the power of hegemons recedes and the prior order breaks down. Despite inspiring positive advances such as the successful ongoing transition of the energy system from fossil fuels to renewables, seven of nine planetary boundaries have already been breached, pushing Earth into the upper reaches of what scientists term the “danger zone,” where cascading tipping points become increasingly likely (Sakschewski et al., 2025; Rockström et al., 2023). Reinforcing lock-ins—from fossil-fuel infrastructure to entrenched inequality—are already deeply entrenched, meaning that local shocks in food, migration, or finance can reverberate through tightly coupled global systems (Wunderling et al., 2024).

Unsurprisingly, only 35% of SDG targets are on track or making moderate progress; almost half stagnate, and 18% have actually reversed (UN, 2025). Geopolitical fragmentation and increasing multipolarity deepen the strain. Recent shifts in US

rather than central direction. This framing suggests that field transformation requires the nurturing of enabling conditions—shared purpose, diverse connections, feedback loops, and space for emergence—rather than mandated change from above.

¹ See <https://www.h3uni.org/resource-library/facilitation-guide/three-horizon-mapping-guide>

² Viewing evaluation as a living system means recognizing it as an adaptive network of actors, institutions, methods, and knowledge traditions that evolves through relationships and mutual influence

policy away from multilateralism toward greater reliance on bilateral arrangements and unilateral action challenge coordinated global action, including in evaluation. Great-power rivalry, weaponized trade, multiplying wars, and a widening digital divide are reshaping supply chains and investment flows just as AI's rapid acceleration is set to change every sector in unpredictable ways.

No technology in our lifetime carries greater potential to reshape societies than AI. It is going to transform virtually every dimension of how we live and work, and at unprecedented speed. It has the power to either accelerate solutions to our most pressing challenges, or deepen the very inequalities and concentrations of power driving the polycrisis.

Isolated incremental fixes cannot keep pace with these system-level failures and threats. Society needs to move beyond current destructive paradigms toward new insights and measures of well-being for a safe, just, and regenerating planet. Now, more than ever, decision-makers need evaluative intelligence calibrated to deal with accelerating nonlinear change and deep uncertainty.

The field of evaluation³ has evolved with changing contexts—from the audit-style, experimental forms of the 1970s to theory-informed and context-sensitive approaches (Weiss, 1972; Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014) and, over the past decade, toward complexity-aware, transformation-focused approaches (Buckton et al., 2025). Important breakthroughs toward future-fit practice have been made, especially in environmental evaluation and by initiatives such as the Transformational Change Learning Partnership⁴ and Blue Marble Evaluation (Patton, 2019). Yet many of the core institutions, theories, criteria, and methods remain 20th-century artifacts, and mainstream evaluation has been much too slow in taking up demonstrated as well as emerging practices that can help the field to adapt to the realities of the polycrisis (Alkin & Patton, 2020; Chaplowe & Hejnowicz, 2021; Picciotto, 2023; Ofir, 2025).

The need for drastic change is increasingly acknowledged across conferences and journals, yet consensus on how to build a future-fit practice remains elusive (Ofir & Rugg, 2021). The Three Horizons for Evaluation Initiative (3HEi) emerged in this context in 2024. Born from the commitment to the urgent imperative of transformation by the International Evaluation Academy,⁵ the initiative has offered a practical, systematic, and participatory approach to envisioning the future of the evaluation field. Since its inception, the academy has explored frontiers such as decolonizing evaluation,⁶ environmental sustainability, equity, and advancing systems approaches. It spearheaded the initiative, embedding it in its 2024–2025 workplan and positioning it at the heart of its working groups, knowledge sharing forums, and deep systems inquiry.

The Three Horizons (3H) framework provided a unifying structure and process for visioning, strategic alignment, and practical action. While the academy took the lead, the intention has been from the start that the 3HEi would serve the global evaluation community as well as those working in other transformation-focused disciplines with an interest in evaluation. We therefore engaged early on with interested participants and partners, accelerated our efforts over time, and used it to inform complementary initiatives such as the Global Evaluation Agenda 2.0 and Eval4Action.⁷

First, we explain our approach and methodology, including our rationale for using the Three Horizons framing. We highlight our results in three maps, one per horizon, detailing the key insights from each. We follow with a discussion of the results, how they connect to other relevant initiatives, and the actions that have followed, before concluding with our final observations of what all this means for the evaluation field.

³ By “field of evaluation” we refer to the coherent body of knowledge, the shared methods and standards, and the community of theorists and practitioners who identify with evaluation and its distinctive purpose.

⁴ <https://www.cif.org/tclp>

⁵ Itself established through the Prague Declaration on Transformational Change; see <https://ideas-global.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Prague-Declaration-4-October-2019.pdf>

⁶ In this paper, “decolonization” refers to the deliberate work of confronting and dismantling dominant Western paradigms that marginalize non-Western, local,

Indigenous, and experiential knowledge. It entails breaking down structures that privilege singular worldviews, legitimizing diverse ways of knowing, redistributing power in decision-making, and advancing culturally grounded, equity-driven approaches that restore voice, agency, and self-determination to historically marginalized societies and communities. It goes beyond cosmetic adaptation toward approaches rooted in distinct histories, values, rights, and experiences.

⁷ See <https://ieac.global/>

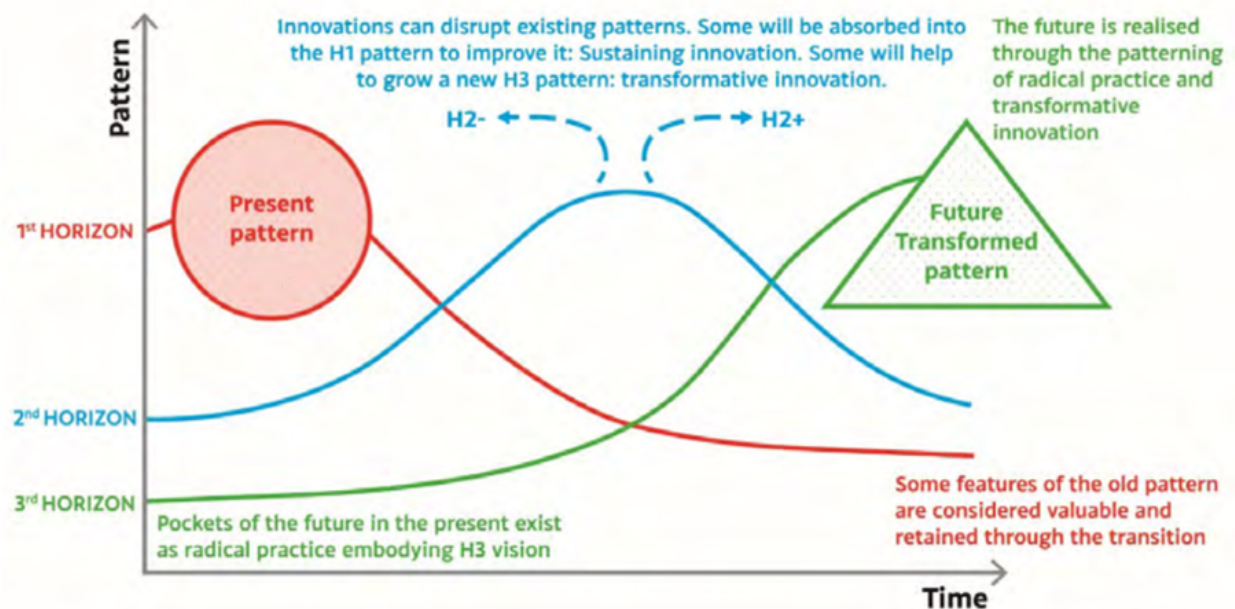
Design and Methodology

Our Choice of Framework

Three Horizons is a strategic foresight framework designed to help organizations, companies, communities, and other groups to navigate transformational change by mapping current realities, envisioning desired futures, and identifying transition pathways (Curry & Hodgson, 2008; Sharpe et al., 2016). Unlike conventional planning, it frames change as a contested transition between today's prevailing system, emerging alternatives, and a desired (aspirational) future—supporting action when causality is nonlinear and outcomes are uncertain.

The framework poses three guiding questions: *Where are we now?* (Horizon 1), *Where do we aspire to be?* (Horizon 3), and *How do we navigate the transition?* (Horizon 2). Crucially, these horizons exist simultaneously, interacting and evolving rather than progressing sequentially. This enables identification of “pockets of the future in the present” (Sharpe et al., 2016, p. 5)—early manifestations of Horizon 3 already emerging, and including valuable elements of Horizon 1 to retain and scale. The approach therefore asks what should be maintained, adapted, or retired, building on existing practice while indicating needed innovations.

Figure 1. The Three Horizons Framework



Note. From “Archetypes of system transition and transformation: Six lessons for stewarding change,” by I. Fazey & G. Leicester, 2022, *Energy Research & Social Science*, 91, 102646 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102646>).

We deployed Three Horizons because by encouraging an aspirational vision and participatory process, it inspires and informs collective agency to act amid uncertainty, merges futures thinking with systems practice, and keeps agency with those it serves. Through mapping prevailing practices, surfacing emerging innovations, and articulating long-term aspirations, our Three Horizons approach enabled participatory, collective sensemaking; revealed

transition pathways for evaluation; and identified both constraining barriers and accelerating opportunities.

The framework also accommodates diverse conceptions of time and facilitates their integration. Western linear time that emphasizes forecasting and control is only one approach to how futures unfold. Indigenous and African worldviews see time as cyclical and relational, anchored in ancestral presence and intergenerational

stewardship (Mbiti, 1990; Cajete, 2000). East Asian thought views time as correlative cycles, where continuity and renewal occur through ethical self-cultivation (Tu, 1989). Middle Eastern Islamic, Persian, and Sufi traditions emphasize moral awareness aligned with higher purpose, where progress emerges from right action rather than control (Ohlander, 2006; Chittick, 2012). Our intention is to leverage—and inspire the leveraging and adaptation of—Three Horizons’ emphasis on values, emergence, and recursion (circularity) for collective sensemaking in a way that resonates across these traditions.

Our Design Approach

Five features distinguished our approach to the Three Horizons framing in 3HEi:

1. The product of the framework is not a road map. Instead, it provides direction and possibilities while allowing for ongoing adjustment and evolution as the future emerges. These are adaptive pathways, with expectation that adjustment will likely be needed as the future unfolds. We have therefore adapted as the work proceeded, and will continue doing so.
2. The 10-year time frame reflects the framework’s typical temporal scope, while accommodating the urgency of our global challenges. It strikes a pragmatic balance: far enough to invite imagination, yet close enough to compel immediate action.
3. We layered human intelligence with artificial intelligence to cluster narrative fragments, prioritizing human contribution while testing the role of AI in such initiatives.
4. While acknowledging the impossibility of representing the diversity in the evaluation field, we strived to gather diverse voices—specialists from different disciplines, experienced and newer evaluators, Indigenous evaluators, and those from underrepresented geographies—to honor the many experiences and perspectives shaping our field, testing the emerging picture in international fora.

5. The process could help strengthen the academy’s capacity for broad collective intergenerational and intercultural engagement, volunteer work, and futures thinking—with the potential to ripple out beyond the academy.

Three Horizons is an effective starting point and foundation for various purposes: envisioning transformation, informing transformation strategy and action, and communicating with diverse audiences. However, we also extended and complemented it in several ways:

We drew on transformation catalysts⁸ and transformation systems⁹ concepts (Waddock et al., 2022; Waddock, 2023) to start to develop a prototype of a recursive system that holds complexity while remaining flexible. In other words, we opted to work with a way of organizing that repeats the same pattern at different levels,¹⁰ becoming increasingly sophisticated at handling complexity through continuous learning rather than fixed ideas or procedures. This is being developed through practice.

We are starting to couple 3HEi with Theory U (Scharmer, 2007) to support participants’ inner work, surfacing their worldviews, recognizing shifts needed to be fully part of the aspirational Horizon 3 future, and building collective capacity to act together.

We tested the robustness of our Three Horizons results using Waddock and Waddell’s (2021) Five Core Dimensions of Purposeful System Transformation framework. It identifies five interdependent dimensions—purpose, perspectives/paradigms, performance metrics, power relationships, and practices/policies/processes—that must transform together to create flourishing socioecological systems. We added an additional dimension, resource flows, which we saw as essential to strengthen the framing.

Finally, we identified a set of Horizon 2 Plus (H2+) qualities that characterize initiatives with a good chance to disrupt or change direction away from Horizon 1, escape capture by the prevailing dominant system, and contribute toward the aspirational vision. We also identified a set of

⁸ Transformation catalysts are individuals, organizations, or initiatives that accelerate systemic change by connecting diverse actors, shifting dominant narratives, and creating conditions that enable transformation to emerge.

⁹ Transformation systems are evolving networks of interconnected initiatives operating through shared learning, emergent leadership, and collaborative

relationships rather than hierarchical control to achieve large-scale systemic change.

¹⁰ For example, the same *see* → *make sense* → *act* → *learn* loop is used in a pilot initiative, an organizational portfolio, a country program, and global network, so that everything stays coherent yet flexible.

Horizon 2 Minus (H2-) qualities that define those initiatives that are more likely to delay the transition by obstructing change or extending the undesirable aspects of the status quo described in Horizon 1.

Our Methodology

The 3HEi process involved a multiphase and cocreative approach. We collected expert input, clustered and mapped it using Three Horizons, validated emerging patterns through broader engagement, used a framework to assess the robustness of our outputs, and finally, developed criteria to identify H2+ pathways and initiatives.

Online Expert Survey. We began with an online expert survey—a purposive, nonrandom solicitation of knowledgeable respondents from the evaluation, transformation, and policy fields. We used 10 tailored questions to elicit current realities, future aspirations, and transition pathways (Appendix 1). Because responses were expected to be lengthy and to require careful human interpretation, we purposively limited invitations to 100 people, selected for their leadership and experience in evaluation or transformation, disciplinary diversity, engagement with and respect

for different knowledge systems, innovative thinking, and geographic distribution.

A total of 39 respondents provided the foundational data set for subsequent mapping and clustering, which we iteratively shared and built upon as the work progressed. Eight core group members and 14 IEAc Friends examined, refined, and analyzed the data and emerging outputs.¹¹ Further input and validation were obtained from more than 300 participants worldwide, reached through five webinars and three conference sessions.¹² We also intentionally sought out additional perspectives from Indigenous evaluation practitioners, representatives of different knowledge systems, and gender specialists.

Human–AI Analysis and Synthesis. We experimented with combining human analysis with artificial intelligence support to manage the volume and richness of the consultation ideas and narratives. AI helped segment and organize more than 1,300 discrete response elements, while human analysts validated outputs and remained responsible for interpretation, clustering, and contextual judgment. We took care to use AI throughout only as an assistive tool for speed, pattern surfacing, and cross-checking (Box 1).

¹¹ Of the 61 persons directly engaged in shaping the results, 50 percent were from the Global South. Of those in the initial consultation that provided the foundational results, 26 percent identified as either presenting Indigenous or Indigenous *and* non-Indigenous perspectives; 51 percent were female and 46 percent male (3 percent preferred not to say); 26 percent were evaluation commissioners, funders and evaluation support agency representatives; 23 percent focused primarily on transformational and/or social change strategy, 15 percent were evaluators, while the rest identified their areas of specialization or roles as

academics, public service managers, impact investors, evidence advocates, civil society and social movement representatives, or as foresight, knowledge systems or Indigenous specialists.

¹² Several webinars with initial respondents and Academy Friends; an online gLocal session, and two EvalforEarth webinars; and in-person engagement at the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA, October 2024); the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS; March 2025); and Transformations Conference (TC/ESG25, August 2025).

Box 1. The Role of AI in our 3HEi Journey

We used conversational AI from the outset to segment lengthy narrative answers into shorter analytical units that humans validated and clustered—the closest our work came to resembling a “pipeline.”

Thereafter, roles shifted: Humans led the analysis and used AI as a sparring partner in sensemaking to reexamine material, test alternative framings, and surface unexpected angles. We moved between LLM models intentionally, seeking not single-pass deterministic outputs but the generative value of patterned variation under continuous human steering. AI proved especially valuable in reading diagrams systemically, reclustering evidence using different logics, and interpreting distinct voices across the material. When AI’s outputs diverged from ours, we explored why. AI functioned as an interlocutor and mirror: By making its default logics visible, it helped us sharpen our perspectives and worldviews.

We found that AI lives comfortably in Horizon 1, amplifying dominant narratives. With vision, it can serve Horizon 3 discovery and reimagination. Horizon 2 is the hinge: whether AI gets captured by H1 efficiency logics or engaged as a companion in unsettling assumptions.

Our process reinforced the notion that how evaluators develop intentional AI engagement will determine whether technology serves transformation or entrenches the status quo.

Clustering, Mapping, and Pathway Identification. All response elements were transferred to a Mural whiteboard for clustering using participative repatterning—a technique that supported the collective discovery of new relationships through the (re)organization of ideas. This process enabled collective sensemaking by making new relational patterns visible and by shaping the content and framing of the emerging clusters.

For each horizon, individual ideas (1) were clustered into themes (2), which were then clustered further (3) and analyzed to identify and depict systemic connections (4). These outputs were then translated into railway maps (Figures 3–5): more readable horizon-specific representations that can also be animated to show the system build. We used the same process described here to produce each of the 3HEi maps. Figure 2 highlights the analysis and clustering steps (the content is not the focus here). It shows how each idea in the survey responses was included in a cluster, which was then further clustered to become part of a bigger picture, and so on. The path of each idea can therefore be traced throughout.

We have identified the H2+ qualities noted earlier to identify initiatives with the strongest potential to help transform the evaluation field. Alongside this, we now intend to draw on Stafford Beer’s Viable System Model (VSM)—a framework that describes what any system, organization, or initiative needs in order to survive independently and respond effectively to a changing environment

(Beer, 1972). In the next phase of our work, we will use a combination of H2+ and VSM thinking to assess whether initiatives and their host organizations have the structural capabilities to sustain their transformative edge and resist capture by dominant Horizon 1 dynamics.

Limitations. Given the size and diversity of the global evaluation community, comprehensive representation was not possible; our work was necessarily limited by the range of perspectives we were successful in inviting. Despite efforts to be inclusive, some invitees were unavailable or declined to participate; transformation specialists, in particular, reported feeling ill equipped to respond. Private-sector invitees were also largely unresponsive. These imbalances inevitably influenced our results, but to help verify, surface omissions, and address representation gaps, the core team opened the maps for critique and additions as they evolved. We particularly valued Indigenous perspectives and efforts to strengthen the focus on gender equity.

We recognize that the Three Horizons framework may be conceptualized and interpreted differently across regions and cultures, although we have been encouraged by the many positive responses worldwide from evaluation specialists with diverse backgrounds.

[illegible]

The framework and process were new for many analysts and were demanding, and all involved were volunteers and therefore limited on time. Combined with the volume and complexity of responses, this slowed the work yet built significant capacities. Having now tested the supportive role AI can play under experienced human supervision, future iterations can engage a much larger number of respondents, and analyze more complex inputs.

This initiative reflects a particular moment in time. From this point forward it can facilitate planning to accelerate the evolution of the field, and serve as a baseline to revisit while the global context and evaluation field continue to coevolve. One area for further development is positioning locally and culturally rooted “origin stories” of the current state (H1) as foundational to cultivating distinct and complementary pathways to a viable future.

Our Results Mapped in Three Horizons

Time is not a river running inexorably to the sea, but the sea itself—its tides that appear and disappear, the fog that rises to become rain ...

—Anishinaabe teaching

In this section, we highlight the main results drawn from our empirical research, confirmed by existing scholarship on evaluation, and visually portrayed in the three railway maps (Figures 3–5). We begin with Horizon 1 to ground the analysis in evaluation’s current assets and limitations, then turn to Horizon 3 to envision it transformed for the future challenges we face, and finally examine Horizon 2 as the critical bridge between present constraints and future possibilities. This ordering provides a clear narrative flow from the present to our aspirational future, and possible transition pathways to get there, while understanding each horizon as having circular, or recursive, relationships with what preceded it and what emerged within and from it.

Horizon 1: The Current State of Evaluation

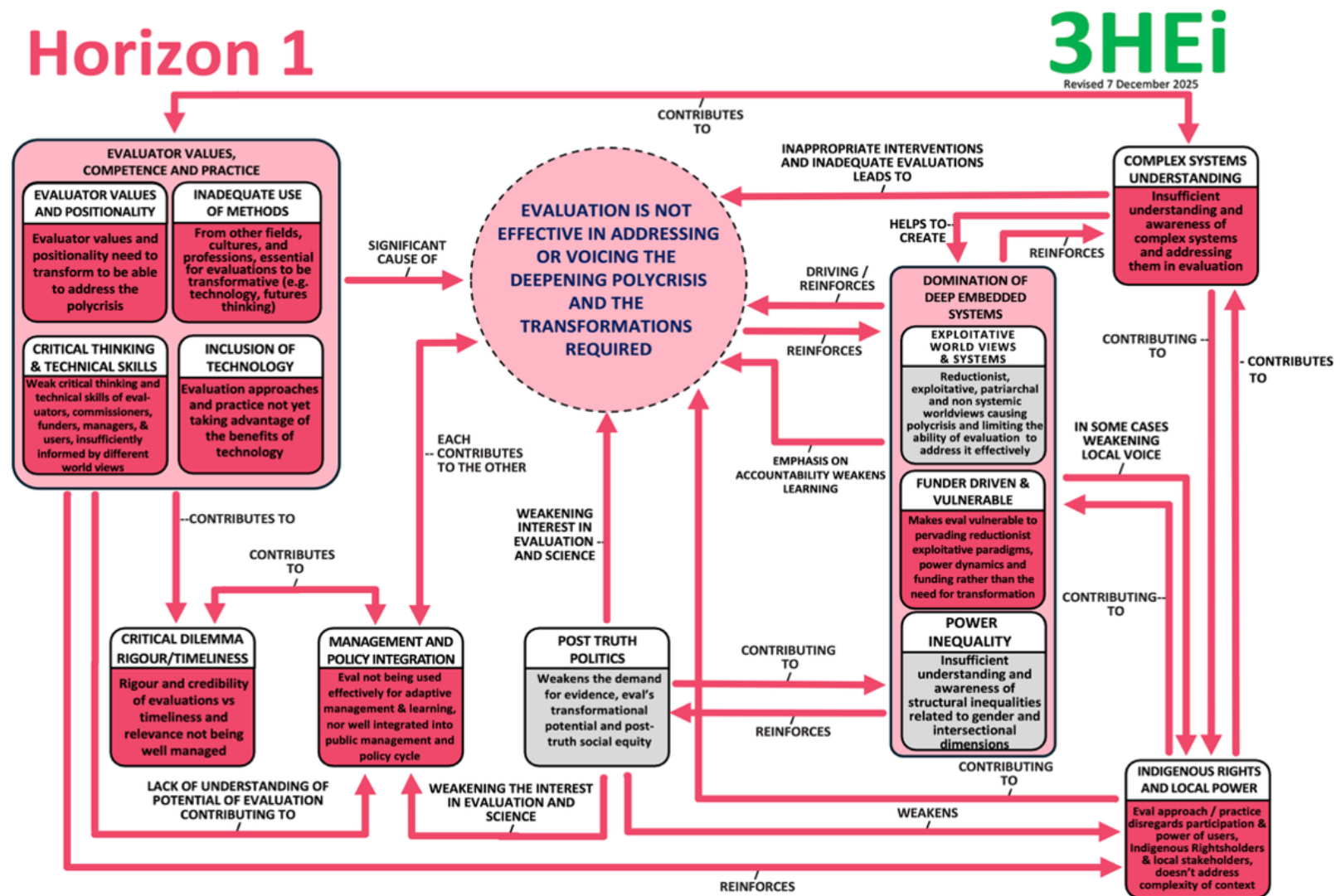
A Field Ill-Prepared for the Future. The Horizon 1 map (Figure 3) reflects a stark assessment. The evaluation field—all those who practice and evolve evaluation, with its institutional and governance arrangements—is not well positioned to address the deepening polycrisis, not because all evaluators lack will or insight, but because systemic constraints limit their influence. Organizations such as the Global Environment Facility have been working on the interaction between humanity and the environment for many years, but this has not

led to the required systemic change, and the crisis has worsened.

This does not mean that all aspects of Horizon 1 are negative. Our data revealed many initiatives that are moving the field forward, as well as many that are foundational in Horizon 1 and that should be maintained. Many working in and with evaluation recognize the transformational imperative and produce work that could inform it, yet find their contributions ignored, deprioritized, or confined by prescribed outdated frameworks and practices. The map exposes these constraining systems while recognizing that within them lie committed organizations and practitioners, emerging innovations, and existing values that can serve as seeds for transformation.

Systemic Constraints on Current Practice. At the heart of Horizon 1 our analysis identified a robust reinforcing loop perpetuated by powerful forces largely beyond evaluation’s reach. Dominant worldviews, destructive economic models, and persistent power asymmetries—including colonial attitudes—sustain reductionist and exploitative patterns that are resistant to change (Lent, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Jordan & Hall, 2023). Evaluation operates within these systems, is shaped by them, and contributes to them. There are pockets of transformation that question systems and explore regenerative futures. However, in many cases a compliance orientation reflects commissioning frameworks designed to serve existing interests. Its limited influence on dominant paradigms reflects the reality that worldviews and economic forces are largely impervious to evidence they find inconvenient. This creates a constraining cycle where evaluation struggles to support transformation because the systems within which it operates neither demand nor reward transformative practice, while those same systems point to evaluation’s limited impact as evidence of its irrelevance. The constraints are real, even though they originate in structures more powerful than evaluation itself.

Figure 3. The 3HEi Horizon 1 Railway Map: The Current State of the Evaluation Field



Interconnected Patterns. The map reveals interconnected patterns where progress in one area is dampened by constraints in others, such as:

- *Mis-, dis- and mal-information* weaken interest in evidence and science alike. Even high-quality evaluations that challenge the status quo struggle for traction when political discourse dismisses evidence. Now spread via AI and social as well as mainstream media, these phenomena challenge all evidence-based practice, compounded when evaluation cannot provide timely evidence for critical decisions.
- *Methodological constraints* emphasizing technical skills over systems understanding produce evaluations ill-suited for leveraging change in complex systems, while marginalizing diverse epistemological traditions.
- *Power and accountability dynamics* tend to prioritize funder-driven compliance over learning, frequently discounting Indigenous and local rights and agency.

Evaluators as Constrained Agents. Specialists working in evaluation occupy a constrained, contradictory yet pivotal position in Horizon 1.

Many may hold values aligned with transformation, yet work within systems often prioritizing funder or political agendas over community voices or planetary well-being. When evaluation fails to include Indigenous and Global South rights-holders, the cause lies less in evaluator intent than in commissioning frameworks that neither require nor reward such inclusion in meaningful ways. Marginalized communities and societies suffer the consequences regardless, while evaluators remain trapped in narrow compliance, accountability, and impact frameworks that do not support transformational change. People working in the field are not powerless, however. They make choices about methods, framing, and whose voices to center. They can be a significant force if they insist and persist, align and collaborate to effect change.

Pockets of the Future in the Present. In Table 1, we highlight the main issues and patterns that emerged from our analysis that hold current problems in place. Despite this sobering analysis, many positive elements already exist that can facilitate transition to Horizon 3. This is addressed in the sections that follow.

Table 1. 3HEi Horizon 1: Critical Issues and Patterns That Hold Problems in Place¹³

System component	Current state (H1)	Reinforcing patterns	Impact on change efforts
Core dynamic	Evaluation constrained in addressing polycrisis, but also limited by limited integration into organizational cycles, its own methods and framing.	Operates within systems largely impervious to evidence; evaluation's own methods and framing compound the problem.	Limits contribution to transformation; maintains the status quo.
Worldviews	Insufficient challenge to dominant worldviews (often exploitative, ¹⁴ neocolonial, reductionist) that shape evaluation.	Multiple reinforcing pathways; evaluation has internalized narrow epistemologies, marginalizing diverse knowledge traditions.	Constrains transformative capacity from within and without.

¹³ Note that rather than using a preconceived structure, we reflect here key issues and/or patterns that arose from the analysis.

¹⁴ Worldviews that deliberately or inadvertently treat people, places, and Nature as resources that can be extracted, controlled, and/or optimized from a short-term perspective, normalizing unequal power, disposability, and the externalization of social and ecological costs. Evaluation that addresses extractive worldviews and practices explicitly surfaces, names, and challenges such practices, tracing how they shape questions, evidence, incentives, and outcomes. It supports shifts toward regenerative, equitable alternatives through accountability, redistribution of voice and decision rights, and learning that changes action.

System component	Current state (H1)	Reinforcing patterns	Impact on change efforts
Political context	Information wars and post-truth politics weakening science and evaluators as trusted advisors.	Reduces demand → undermines relevance → further marginalization.	Existential threat to evidence-based practice.
Methodological constraints	Methods often not well designed or applied for complexity; over-emphasis on limited technical skills, lacking interdisciplinarity.	Commissioning frameworks reward narrow approaches; limited understanding of systems, other disciplines and politics → inappropriate evaluation designs.	Many evaluations ill-suited for transformation.
Power dynamics	Insufficient challenge to funder-driven compliance and Western development paradigms over other interests and approaches.	Commissioning frameworks frequently exclude or underplay regenerative, Indigenous, Global South or local framings, voice and agency.	Reinforces existing asymmetries.
Evaluator positionality and positioning ¹⁵	Constrained but potentially pivotal; many seek change yet lack structural support and sometimes requisite competencies.	Navigate between commissioner demands and societal / community / Nature's needs; professional development has not kept pace.	Key leverage point, requiring both external enablement and internal development.

Horizon 3: An Aspirational Future

A Transformed Field, Fit for Our Challenging Future. The Horizon 3 map (Figure 4) presents an aspirational vision for the future, well aligned with those who have recorded their wish for a field able to contribute to a better world amid multiplying challenges (see, e.g., Brousselle et al., 2024; Parsons et al., 2019). By 2035, all evaluations—whether conducted by humans, AI or a combination—contribute systematically, systemically and meaningfully to transforming social-ecological systems toward a just and regenerative planet. It is a core competency across sectors, used in policy and organizational cycles, and valued by citizens. It represents more than incremental advancement. It constitutes a complete reimagining of the purpose and value of evaluation, from an often-marginal function to a vital force integrated into organizational processes and driving societal and ecological transformation,

continuing to coevolve with changes in contexts and cultures.

A Transformative Vision. Evaluation will have achieved sophisticated integration of transdisciplinary¹⁶ approaches, understanding of complex adaptive systems, agile and foresight methodologies, enabling rapid response to dynamic and uncertain contexts. This technical evolution will be matched by profound shifts in mindset and values: regenerative thinking will replace extractive logic; social justice and the common good will become central aims; advanced technologies will support new forms of practice; and adaptive learning will replace rigid adherence to predetermined frameworks. Notably, it does not exclude independent or external evaluation, but strives to make self-initiated evaluative thinking and real-time adaptive practices thrive, and become integrated into organizations' management cycles.

¹⁵ Evaluators' positioning is the explicit, chosen stance—the purpose, values, and role in the system—that shapes their priorities and judgments. Positionality is the evaluator's social and institutional location and lived experience that implicitly influences how they see and interpret the work.

¹⁶ A transdisciplinary approach integrates and coproduces knowledge across disciplines as well as with practitioners and affected parties in order to understand complex realities and generate actionable assessments that no single field or stakeholder perspective could produce alone.

Constraints and Omissions. While aspirational, the Horizon 3 analysis acknowledges potential barriers to its realization. Some respondents noted pessimistic scenarios involving growing inequities, potential global conflict, biodiversity loss, and climate change that could make evaluation irrelevant as societies focus on survival rather than transformation.

Hidden and especially invisible power¹⁷ often undermines real shifts in power, as they shape which issues surface, and frequently prevent challenges to the status quo (Lukes, 1974/2005; Gaventa, 2006).

Simply shifting visible power to non-Western and local actors or evaluators may not yield desired changes in theory and practice; even managers and evaluators from the Global South do not always recognize the extent to which their education and work reflect dominant narratives and approaches, given limited exposure to their own cultural histories and philosophies, and hence potential innovations (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013; Dighe, 2023; Masvaure & Motlanthe, 2022).

Practical constraints—some of which have not been noted in either Horizon 1 or Horizon 3—also demand attention. For example, realizing this future requires substantial resources to support transformative evaluation practice, yet funding for such work is rare. Furthermore, in these horizons most of the attention is on improving evaluation supply, with inadequate consideration of the demand-side dynamics that are so crucial in the use and impact of evaluative evidence.

The main elements of the Horizon 3 vision are summarized in Table 2. We compare these with similar elements in the analysis of the status quo in Horizon 1.¹⁸ Note that pockets of H3 do exist in the present, as well as examples of potentially transformational initiatives.

¹⁷ Gaventa distinguishes visible power (formal roles, decisions, laws, rules), hidden power (controlling which issues and voices reach the agenda), and invisible power (shaping beliefs about what is normal, possible, or

legitimate). Addressing only visible power leaves deeper structures of exclusion intact.

¹⁸ Rather than using a predefined structure, we reflect here and in the following tables key issues and/or patterns that arose from the analysis.

Figure 4. The 3HEi Horizon 3 Railway Map: An Aspirational Future for the Field of Evaluation

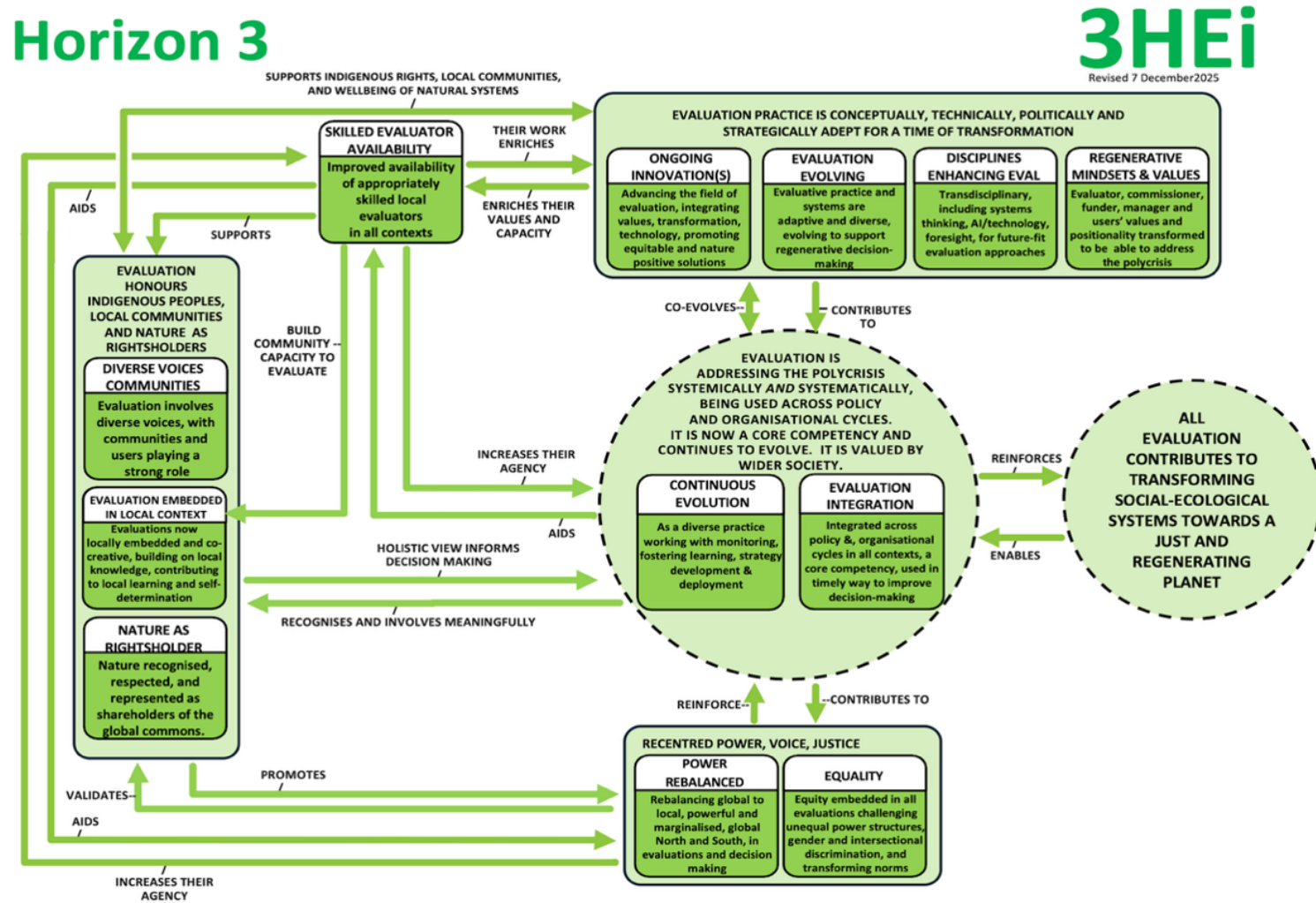


Table 2. 3HEi Horizon 3: Contrasting the Current State of Evaluation with the Aspirational Vision

Dimension	Horizon 1 (current state)	Horizon 3 (aspirational vision)
Institutional approach	Often marginalized; external afterthought with limited integration into organizational cycles.	Evaluation as core societal capability seamlessly embedded across all governance and organizational levels, embraced by society.
Power dynamics	Perpetuates exploitative worldviews and funder-driven priorities; marginalizes plurality of voices and agency.	Evaluation as catalyst for dismantling inequality; power flows across ecosystems, amplifying marginalized voices and cultivating agency.
Technology integration	Despite mixed-methods advances, inadequate engagement with integration; emphasis primarily on technical skills.	AI and emerging technologies are actively shaped by the evaluation field for regenerative ends, with sophisticated engagement with data sets and algorithms in human-AI cooperation.
Knowledge systems	Reductionist Western models dominate. Subtle bias in practice against non-Western approaches; limited engagement with Indigenous and Nature's interests and rights, and asymmetric power dynamics.	Evaluation supports and deeply engages concepts and practices from Indigenous and Global South societies, communities, and Nature as rights-holders—truly honoring diverse knowledge systems and agency, and focusing on regeneration and life.
Evaluation specialist capacity and agency	Constrained between interests of funders and intended beneficiaries; concentrated in elite institutions.	Globally informed and/or locally rooted evaluation practitioners with political, contextual, cultural, and appropriate technical competence and agency, able to move across boundaries.
Practice integration	Primarily external judgment after implementation; compliance and narrow accountability for predicted impacts promoted over deep learning and adaptation.	Evaluation largely an embedded capacity for continuous learning, real-time course correction, and adaptive management across project, program, portfolio, and policy cycles, alongside independent engagement.
Evidence and rigor	Persisting tension between rigor and timeliness; hierarchy of evidence, with “gold standard” experimental designs often prioritized with narrow frameworks.	Evaluation promotes and uses expanded definitions of and approaches to rigor, transdisciplinary approaches, systems and complexity concepts, and foresight methodologies; a learning orientation promotes timeliness; and the importance of lived experience is recognized.
Societal valuing	Post-truth politics and inadequate positioning of the field are weakening interest in evidence.	Widely valued by society; citizens, policymakers, and other evidence users turn to evaluation as integral to wise, informed planning and decision-making.
Global–local relations	Funder-driven approaches; power inequalities; insufficient recognition of Indigenous voice and Global South priorities and needs.	Fundamental rebalancing between Global South and North. Indigenous and other non-Western cultures, and local to transnational communities, managers, evaluators, etc. drive agendas with new lenses on need, progress, and innovation.
Human-nature relationships	Nature seen as resource to exploit.	Evaluation treats Nature as rights-holder and humans as part of Nature, drawing on both legal frameworks and relational worldviews, replacing extractive logic with regenerative accountability,

Dimension	Horizon 1 (current state)	Horizon 3 (aspirational vision)
		and treating ecosystems as subjects rather than resources.

Horizon 2: Pathways to an Aspirational Future

Systemic Leadership for Social-Ecological Transformation. At the center of Horizon 2 are inspired and informed leaders who understand and work with systems, driving the transformation of the field. With growing instability in many governance and political systems, it is unlikely that drastic change will be driven by government initiatives where politics may lead to changes in direction. Instead, such leadership must emerge from coalitions of those deeply committed to evaluation and its value for this time—leaders in society or communities; in companies, organizations and their networks; whether as users, funders, commissioners, or evaluators.

These leaders need to imagine healthy and regenerative futures, beyond current destructive paradigms toward new measures of well-being and a safe, just, and regenerating planet. Crucially, active groups need to work on focused areas to develop in-depth, practice-based knowledge and action-learning; partnerships are already emerging around some of the mapped clusters, creating dynamic networks of potential transformation catalysts.

The Glocal Imperative. Transformation, including of the evaluation field, requires working glocally: simultaneously engaging local to global scales—focusing on empowerment at local level (even if working from national and transnational perspectives—for example, in bioregions),¹⁹ as well as on regional and/or global coordination. Power and agency have to be with such local authorities and efforts navigating increasingly difficult circumstances, while planetary challenges such as climate mitigation, peace efforts, and the protection of Nature demand large-scale coordinated action. This paradox resolves through approaches that strengthen societal and local agency, while connecting communities, authorities, and Nature across scales. Evaluation requires the same capabilities.

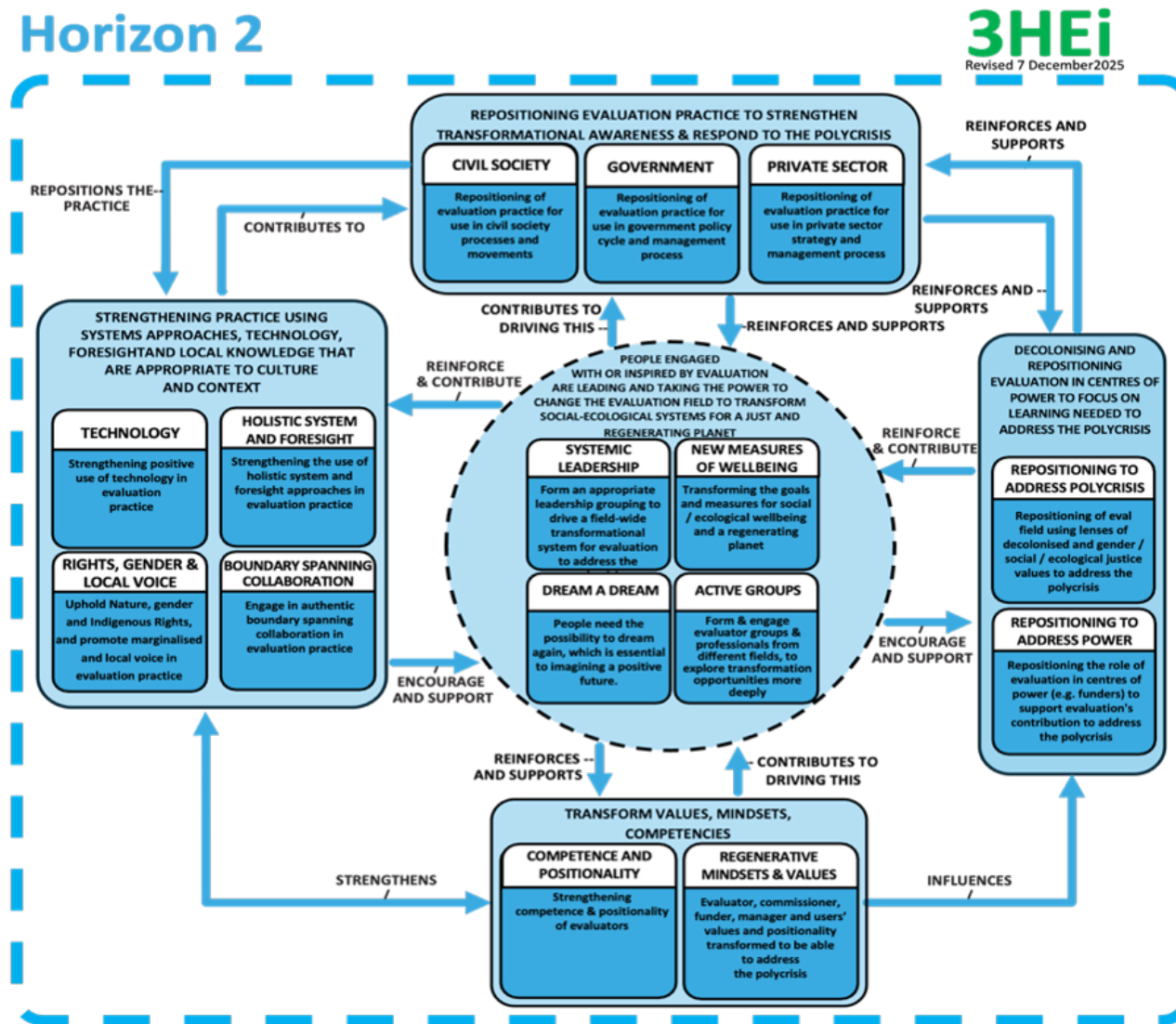
Four Critical Interconnected Pathways. The Horizon 2 map (Figure 5; Table 3) reveals four critical pathways—interconnected clusters linking current evaluation practice (Horizon 1) with the aspirational vision of Horizon 3. These pathways need to operate as mutually reinforcing elements of an integrated strategy. Transformation seldom emerges from any single intervention; rather, it needs aligned action across multiple leverage points, building momentum across timescales. Only then will evaluation be understood and used as a core societal capability for generative futures.

Together, existing, emergent, and potential developments provide connection points, resources, and energy for the transition, making the maps a living canvas for planning and action.

¹⁹ Bioregional development organizes economic and social life around ecologically defined territories, fostering place-based governance, local resilience, and

reciprocal relationships between human communities and the living systems that sustain them.

Figure 5. The 3HEi Horizon 2 Railway Map: Pathways Toward an Aspirational Future



Critical Pathway 1: Cultivating Regenerative Values and Competencies. This pathway is foundational. It recognizes that technical competence without a change in values will perpetuate destructive systems under the guise of improvement. Neutrality is often a fiction that sustains the harmful dynamics of current economic and social systems, which is why explicit positioning for just societies and planetary health is essential. Without it, evaluation risks complicity in social and ecological destruction.

We need to combine living-systems thinking with regenerative values across the entire evaluation ecosystem—among commissioners, funders, managers, evaluators, and the wider society that uses evaluation evidence. We approach the evaluation ecosystem as a living system, shaped by relationships, feedback, and the values that guide our choices. When practitioners operate from life-serving principles, they can produce results that make the transformative potential of evaluation visible, which in turn can draw in the resources and support needed for regenerative approaches to take root and expand through reinforcing feedback loops.

Recognizing the Rights of Nature (Gallagher & Ofir, 2021) and Indigenous nations as rights-holders is therefore foundational. It is not something to “add in”; it changes what evaluation is for and how it is done, making it possible to address root causes of social-ecological crises in contextually appropriate ways. While existing work on Rights of Nature and Indigenous rights provides starting points, success depends on a fundamental reorientation rather than incremental inclusion (EvalIndigenous, 2024; Chilisa & Bowman, 2023; Dighe & Matthias, 2023).

Critical Pathway 2: Strengthening Evaluative Practice Through Innovation Adapted to Culture and Context. The map highlights interconnected areas where evaluative practice should be strengthened: approaches suited to complex adaptive systems (explored by Askar et al., this issue); ethical design and use of technology (explored by Magodo-Matimba & Raftree, this issue); integration of foresight methodologies (explored by Lichty et al., this issue); and work grounded in local and Indigenous knowledge, voice, gender, and rights (explored by Zaveri et al. and Podems et al., this issue)—alongside the competencies needed to support these shifts (explored by Chaplowe et al., this issue). Existing transformational practices can be scaled and connected, building on rich foundations of

methods, approaches, standards, and innovations already in use or emerging.

Transformative leverage increases when innovations form webs of mutual reinforcement: Ethical technology enables broader participation in evaluation; participation strengthens local knowledge systems; these inform more culturally responsive approaches; and those approaches demonstrate evaluation’s relevance for society- or community-defined priorities. These webs of mutual reinforcement support organic scaling rather than forced adoption. Furthermore, by integrating foresight, evaluation can anticipate emerging risks and opportunities, making evidence more timely, decision-relevant, and futures-oriented.

Critical Pathway 3: Epistemic Justice and Repositioning Power. This pathway addresses the power asymmetries that constrain evaluation’s transformative potential. Decolonizing and repositioning evaluation are essential. Success depends in part on funders recognizing that narrow compliance demands, including the accountability and impact logics of results-based management frameworks, often inhibit the systemic understanding and learning needed to respond to interconnected crises.

Equally important, those who hold decision-making power in evaluation need to surface and actively shift the dominant narratives and assumptions that shape what questions are asked and whose interpretations carry weight. This includes moving beyond framings of growth at all costs—growth for whom, of what, and where—and beyond framings that cast communities as “beneficiaries” to be fixed, rather than as rights-holders and knowledge-holders able to define the priorities, progress, and success of place-based regeneration.

As Shipurkar et al. explore in this issue, existing work to strengthen local voice, power, and rights can accelerate this repositioning. The pathway’s transformative potential lies in reinforcing loops. As Indigenous, Global South, Nature’s rights, and diverse knowledge systems gain recognition, local contexts are increasingly respected, an intersectional gender equity lens is applied, and socioecological systems insights deepen. This reinforcing process strengthens local evaluative capacity, which can challenge dominant paradigms and create demand for further decolonization, supporting evaluation that is genuinely responsive to the needs of the planet and those most affected by interventions, not only responsive to those funding them.

Critical Pathway 4: Repositioning Evaluation Practice Across Organizational Systems and Boundaries. This pathway addresses the historical marginalization of evaluation, which is often treated as an orphan or optional extra outside mainstream organizational processes in government, civil society, the private sector, and academia, among others. Instead, the pathway calls for embedding evaluative practice throughout the management process, with particular value for government policy design and implementation. The strategic shift is from retrospective judgment to real-time learning that supports adaptive management across policy, strategy, portfolio, and program cycles under an environment of increasing uncertainty. Transformation takes hold when organizations experience evaluation as a core capability for navigating complexity and emergent

challenges, rather than as a compliance burden. This will require demonstrating the contribution of evaluation to timely, relevant decisions across organizational and policy cycles, creating demand-pull (not supply-push) dynamics that sustain integration even when external mandates change.

There is already significant work to build upon. Evaluation can contribute to diagnosis through foresight approaches, as explored by Lichty et al. in this issue; to design through tools such as theories of change; to implementation through responsive rapid approaches or developmental evaluation; and to outcomes and impact through systems-informed methods (Askar et al., this issue). In this issue, repositioning across government systems is explored by Goldman et al., while applications in civil society are examined by Shipurkar et al.

Table 3. 3HEi Horizon 2: Summary of the Four Critical Pathways Toward the Aspirational Vision

Critical pathway	Core focus	Key elements	Interconnections
Cultivating regenerative values and competencies	Rejecting fiction of neutrality; explicit positioning as supporting societal and planetary health and regeneration with competencies for system transformation.	• Living-systems lens and relational values related to humans and Nature • Rights of Nature and respect for Indigenous Peoples as rights-holders is a prerequisite, not add-on; orientation to a just and safe space within planetary boundaries. • Hard and soft competencies across entire evaluation and evidence ecosystem. • Building on existing capacity-strengthening initiatives. • Creating feedback loops that strengthen entire system.	Enables all of H2; without it the work will not be transformational
Strengthening evaluative practice through innovation, adapted to culture and context	Complexity-capable methods, foresight, and ethical (including AI-enabled) technology, grounded in local / Indigenous knowledge, rights, gender, and voice.	• Scaling existing “pockets of the future in the present” initiatives and practices. • Building on rich foundation of methods and innovations. • Creating web of mutually reinforcing innovations. • Amplifying local, Indigenous, marginalized, and gender voices and realities.	Technology clusters connect to decolonizing efforts; foresight approaches included, also linking to repositioning evaluation in policy cycles ensuring doing no harm and leaving no one behind.

Critical pathway	Core focus	Key elements	Interconnections
Decolonizing and repositioning evaluation in centers of power	Moving from narrow compliance and accountability frameworks to addressing polycrisis as central mission.	• Building on local contexts. • Upholding rights of Indigenous peoples, Global South, and Nature, and diverse knowledge systems. • Rebalancing funders from accountability to learning. • Interrogating and shifting dominant narratives and assumptions that shape evaluation practice.	Connects directly to strengthening evaluative practice through local knowledge systems; links to regenerative competency development.
Repositioning evaluative practices across organizational systems and boundaries	From marginalized “orphan” to embedded evaluative practices across entire policy, strategy, and program cycles—in civil society, government, and the private sector—to respond to the polycrisis and breakdown of old systems	• Recognition of role in all phases of these cycles. • Foresight approaches, including in diagnostic phase to anticipate emerging risks and opportunities, and improve timeliness and decision-relevance of evidence. • Evaluative thinking, responsive developmental and rapid evaluation—internal, external, independent—during diagnosis and implementation—and timely for plans and decisions. • Prove evaluation adds value for policies, plans, and decisions, creating demand-led integration rather than compliance-driven uptake.	Links to innovation pathway; reinforced by regenerative competencies, links to evaluation in centers of power.

Assessing the Transformative Potential of the 3HEi Results

Our Three Horizons analysis provided a comprehensive vision for transforming the field of evaluation. However, since the Horizon 2 pathways emerged primarily from evaluation specialists, we needed to assess whether they would deliver genuine transformation rather than cosmetic reform. We therefore examined our results through Waddock and Waddell’s framework (2021) for purposeful system transformation (see Design and Methodology section above). We selected this framework because it provides diagnostic criteria specifically designed to assess genuine system

transformation. Most better-known frameworks, such as in Kania et al. (2018), address only systems change, stopping short of transformation.

In Table 4 we see that the 3HEi results align well with all five transformation dimensions in the Waddock and Waddell framework, with particularly strong alignment in the deeper leverage points. We also added a sixth dimension, which we considered essential in this context.

Purpose emerges as the strongest dimension. The shift from evaluation as assessment for accountability and compliance toward evaluation as catalyst for transforming social-ecological systems toward a just, regenerative planet is explicitly articulated across all horizons. Horizon 3’s central message—evaluation as a core

societal capability fit for this time of polycrisis—provides a clear new purpose. All four Horizon 2 pathways operationalize this through transforming power relations, cultivating regenerative values, repositioning practices, and strengthening innovation.

Perspectives and paradigms are very well covered through comprehensive shifts from reductionist paradigms to systems thinking capable of navigating complexity and uncertainty. The H2+ emphasis operationalizes transformation by prioritizing pathways that challenge dominant thinking. The decolonizing framework positions Indigenous, Global South, and diverse knowledge systems as fundamental rather than peripheral to evaluation practice. However, private sector and demand-side perspectives, and the need for sufficient resourcing, are conspicuously absent.

Performance and impact measures are addressed through the shift from conventional practices, including preference for experimental and quantitative metrics, toward measures of social-ecological well-being and regenerative impact. Methodologies for assessing transformational outcomes (focusing on signals of systemic change, vectors, trajectories, and integrative rubrics) are under development but seldom applied. This dimension will strengthen considerably if the proposed purpose shift and pathways are implemented, cognizant of how concepts and measures of “progress” and “success” need to change.

Power relationships are comprehensively addressed through epistemic justice frameworks across all horizons. The analysis demonstrates sophisticated understanding that transformation requires fundamental shifts in who controls evaluation agendas and resources, explicitly targeting redistribution from frequent Western dominance toward Indigenous, Global South, and local leadership, while addressing center–periphery dynamics²⁰ within all countries.

Practices, policies, and processes receive extensive coverage through repositioning evaluation from marginalized retrospective assessment to practices embedded throughout organizational cycles—from agenda setting through implementation and outcome assessment. The four pathways provide comprehensive transformation strategies, although specific implementation mechanisms require further development.

Resource flows—our addition as sixth dimension—represent a critical gap in 3HEi,²¹ together with private sector and demand-side perspectives. While Horizon 1 acknowledges funder-driven priorities constraining transformation and Horizon 3 implies fundamental resource shifts, practical mechanisms for redirecting funding toward transformative practice remain underspecified. This gap reflects a broader demand–supply imbalance: evaluators may seek to develop transformation-focused practice, but demand from funders, commissioners, and users often lags behind.

Table 4. 3HEi Pathways Assessed Against Transformation Dimensions (Waddock & Waddell adapted, 2021)

Transformation dimension	Horizon 1 (current)	Horizon 3 (future)	Horizon 2 (pathways)	Assessment
Purpose	Assessment primarily for accountability / compliance with narrow views of progress and success	Catalyst for transforming social-ecological systems toward a just, regenerative planet	All four pathways operationalize purpose as transformation; decolonizing repositions evaluation’s mission.	Excellent: Clear transformational purpose as organizing principle, with comprehensive pathways.
Perspectives / paradigms	Reductionist paradigms; bias against	Systems thinking navigating complexity; Indigenous and	H2+ focus will challenge dominant thinking; decolonizing pathway embraces	Very strong: Comprehensive paradigm transformation

²⁰ Center–periphery dynamics refer to power imbalances where dominant actors control resources and agendas while marginalizing others. In evaluation, this can manifest both globally (Global North over South) and

within countries (capital cities over regions, elite institutions over community organizations).

²¹ Note that this aspect is not part of the original Waddock and Waddell framework; we added it, as we consider it an essential dimension in the context of evaluation.

Transformation dimension	Horizon 1 (current)	Horizon 3 (future)	Horizon 2 (pathways)	Assessment
	non-Western approaches	Global South knowledge systems built upon	Indigenous / Global South and regenerative worldviews.	framework with operational criteria; yet significant gaps incl. demand side, private sector, resourcing.
Performance and impact measures	Narrow, predefined criteria, measures, and questions; “gold standard” experimental and quantitative designs often prioritized.	Expanded rigor, progress, and success definitions; transdisciplinary approaches; social-ecological well-being indicators; growth for whom, of what, where.	Innovation pathway develops new methodologies; regenerative values pathway reframes progress and success measures.	Moderate: Clear direction, and pathways address methodology development, but need for changes in criteria; measures and questions are largely implicit.
Power relationships	Funder- and state-driven priorities; marginalized Indigenous voices; subtle, persistent Global North dominance; hidden and invisible power.	Power flows to local, subnational ecosystems; Indigenous and Global South theories and practices integrate with convention to drive agendas.	Decolonizing pathway explicitly redistributes power; glocal approach connects local–global dynamics.	Excellent: Sophisticated framework with dedicated transformation pathway.
Practices / policies / processes	Often afterthought; tends toward compliance over learning; not focused on or contributing to systems change.	Embedded across governance levels; continuous learning capacity; seamless policy integration.	Repositioning pathway embeds practices across organizational cycles; innovation pathway strengthens methods.	Strong: Comprehensive repositioning strategy, but implementation needs development, as “the devil is in the detail.”
Resource flows	Funding for aid limited; evidence generation including evaluation often not prioritized in government action. Funder-driven priorities constraining transformation; insufficient funding for transformative practice.	Fundamental shifts toward supporting regenerative evaluation; resources aligned with transformative rather than compliance purposes.	Limited focus on funding redirection mechanisms; broader demand–supply imbalances where transformation-focused evaluators lack corresponding demand from funders, users, commissioners.	Weak: Critical gap with underspecified practical mechanisms for ensuring evaluation is valued, funded, and redirected toward transformation.

To further verify the transformative potential of the four pathways, we examined them through the lens of several established perspectives on how transformation occurs: Geels's multi-level perspective confirms that the four pathways target appropriate transition dynamics across interactions among niches, sociotechnical regimes, and broader landscape developments (Geels, 2002, 2011). Kuhn's account of scientific revolutions confirms that they address conditions under which established paradigms may undergo discontinuous, non-cumulative change (Kuhn, 1970). Bourdieu's field theory confirms that they challenge the structural mechanisms through which fields reproduce their established relations and distributions of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Together with the purposeful system transformation framework advanced by Waddock and Waddell (2021), these analyses confirm that the four pathways are not reform proposals but address the specific dynamics through which fields may actually transform.

Discussion

The results of the 3HEi process resonate very well with published evidence and expert perspectives. They highlight many issues that demand urgent attention—in particular from those with the power to shape what is done, how, when, and for and by whom. We explore here those that we find to be most significant.

The central message is that the polycrisis makes accelerating the relevance of evaluation an urgent priority for action. The stark contrasts between Horizon 1 and Horizon 3 illuminate what transformation requires: fundamental shifts where regenerative thinking replaces exploitative worldviews, embedded learning overtakes external judgment, and evaluation becomes a core capability for societal transformation. The field has made real progress. Systems- and complexity-aware methods have matured, transformation has entered discourses and practices; participatory and culturally responsive practices have spread, environmental evaluation has developed robust methodologies, and decolonizing frameworks are multiplying. Yet two critical blind spots persist: Ecological consciousness remains absent from much of mainstream practice despite some impressive advances, and (often subtle) Western dominance as well as hidden and invisible power dynamics continue largely unexamined. There is a persistent gap between what we know and can do, and what is

routinely commissioned and used. What lags is the concerted effort needed to embed living-systems insights into mainstream practice before continued incrementalism makes evaluation irrelevant to the challenges that matter most.

This situation requires evaluators to make values explicit: “Good” should mean a safe, just, regenerative humanity living within planetary boundaries. Evaluation has often been cautious about appearing activist, but this is not a call for political or ideological activism. In an era of existential threats, claims of neutrality become complicit in perpetuating harmful practices. Unless values-explicit and social justice approaches move from specialist niches into foundational expectations of quality, evaluation runs the risk of offering “neutrality” that defaults to serving the interests of destructive power. We need to adjust evaluation criteria and make ethical commitments as well as the inevitable trade-offs visible.

It is therefore essential to treat societies and Nature as one integrated living system; otherwise, “success” is misconstrued. Evaluation has long separated “social” and “environmental” domains based on the reductionist thinking that helped produce the polycrisis. Working with social-ecological systems as integrated wholes changes the unit of analysis from isolated interventions to patterns, feedback, resilience, and regeneration over time. It requires incorporating emerging efforts around the voice and rights of Nature so that well-being is not pursued by degrading the conditions for life.

This means that we need to be more adept at creating the conditions for change, using a living-systems lens to make systems thinking real in practice. Living systems are adaptive, self-organizing, and shaped by dynamic relationships. They cannot be managed, or change predicted, as if they were machines. This means that we need to focus on *creating the conditions for desirable change to happen* rather than obsess mainly about impacts achieved. We need to shift away from linear logic models and mechanistic assumptions toward approaches that work with emergence, feedback loops, and continuous learning, so that evaluation supports adaptation. The biggest barrier to such practice remains operational, with commissioning approaches, reporting formats, and quality standards that still tend to reward linear reductionist thinking, including interventions isolated from the systems of which they are part.

Our results also indicate that plurality has to shift from “inclusion” in someone

else's process to becoming a central capability for transformation. The polycrisis cannot be navigated from a single epistemology. Transformation requires multiple pluralities—knowledge systems (Indigenous, Global South, local, scientific); diverse participation and voices; impact and systemic investors as well as government and development funders; and transdisciplinary collaboration across fields of work. This will accelerate learning and ensure that evidence is legitimate, action-oriented, and grounded in context. Many in the field are working to demonstrate what is possible and desirable, but structural change is needed in how commissioning works, funds, prioritizes, and validates evidence, and whose voice counts.

Power and incentives decide what becomes “mainstream”; they need to be analyzed, mobilized, and shifted where necessary. Constraints on transformation continue to reside in those commissioning frameworks that do not embrace a living-systems approach to change, often still require compliance over learning, and decline to ask uncomfortable evaluation questions or use appropriate, nonstandard evaluation criteria.²² Visible changes such as more Global South and Indigenous leadership and voice make a difference, but they are insufficient if hidden and invisible power continues to shape agendas, ownership of interventions, results, and resource flows. A strategic priority is to articulate evaluation's value proposition for society in the polycrisis, and to act where leverage is concentrated—for example, in the foundation / private sector, bilateral, multilateral, and development bank evaluation ecosystems.

Advanced technologies raise both opportunities and risks, and we need to prepare now, ethically and strategically. AI and the digital transformation are accelerating how evidence is generated, synthesized, and used. This offers new capabilities for a living-systems approach, but also risks rising water and energy use, bias, loss of judgment, and concentration of power. These developments furthermore intensify the ethical questions that accompany expanded influence: how evaluators navigate values-based positioning alongside rigor and professional standards, and how accountability works when evaluation engages with systemic change. Evaluation has to engage proactively, building literacy, governance, and safeguards so that

technology strengthens participation, accountability, and depth in insight, rather than narrowing them and perpetuating Western knowledge and values hidden in algorithms and the AI knowledge base.

Transformation will come through a transformation system rather than through solo actors; vision-driven, committed collaboration can scale uptake. Isolated innovations seldom shift a field; transformation emerges through networks that share an aspirational vision; learn, connect, and cohere actors and initiatives across multiple boundaries (sector, disciplinary, generational, and ideological); and shift narratives and practice norms as well as resources. A collaboration is forming as a result of this 3HEi initiative and the Global Evaluation Agenda 2.0. This needs intentional expansion to national government systems, transformation and scientific networks, Indigenous organizations, grassroots movements, and private sector foundations and other actors.

Implementation will be challenged without aligned resources and efforts that can help address the pathways simultaneously and cultivate new demands for evidence and evaluation. The critical gap is not further innovation, but mechanisms that can redirect funding toward concerted efforts to advance the positioning and practice of evaluation, and intensify demand for what transformation-focused evaluation can and should offer—from transformation specialists, foundations, the private and academic sectors, and society at large. Organizations including foundations on which we can build already exist—emerging innovations and pockets of the future already in the present that need to be connected and scaled. This is why the four pathways must be executed as an integrated strategy—not necessarily coordinated, but aligned, mutually reinforcing, overlapping, and sustained; piecemeal, isolated reforms are too readily neutralized by existing system dynamics.

Taking Action

An Emerging Coalition to Drive Transformation

Our Three Horizons Evaluation Initiative coincides with three complementary initiatives: the Global

²² For example South Africa has developed evaluation criteria on transformative equity and ecosystem health, which are meant to be applied in all evaluations.

Evaluation Agenda 2.0 (GEA 2.0) led by EvalPartners, Eval4Action Strategy 2.0, and this special *JMDE* edition on evaluation and the transformational imperative, led by the IEAc. The timing reflects growing recognition across the field that an incremental approach to evaluation's development is insufficient for current challenges. Rather than competing visions, the collaboration between these initiatives offers complementary and overlapping approaches to facilitate the essential changes identified.

The focus of GEA 2.0 on enabling environments, institutional and individual capacities, and catalytic actions provides practical frameworks for implementing the systemic changes identified in our Horizon 2 pathways (and was informed by the 3HEi). They directly address structural and resource gaps. Eval4Action's emphasis on youth engagement and thought-leadership addresses the generational renewal essential for transformation.

Strategic alignment culminated in a joint launch in July 2025 of the revised Three Horizons maps. This initiated the evolving partnership, currently between IEAc and six global evaluation networks,²³ all four regional voluntary organizations for professional evaluation (VOPEs),²⁴ and EvalforEarth; members of whom have contributed to this article. We trust this will grow to include other powerful actors, as collaborative leadership capability is essential for success.

These efforts align with Waddock et al.'s (2023) concept of "transformation systems"—networks of initiatives operating through shared purpose, learning, and emergent leadership rather than hierarchical control. Such systems create spaces for diverse engagement and generate continuous learning while maintaining momentum. Realizing the transformation system potential of this partnership will require intentional expansion beyond traditional evaluation networks to include, for example, policymakers and public managers, Indigenous networks, transformation and systemic investing specialists, research organizations, and grassroots movements.

The partnership has adopted a values-based action-learning approach that combines implementation with continuous reflection and adaptation, directly addressing the mental models by embedding new ways of thinking and working throughout the transformation system, and being

explicit about the principles or values which underlie the work. A core group has been established to steward the collective process, identify complementarities, and initiate experimentation and learning. Working groups build on existing IEAc and partner initiatives, and aim to cycle through analysis, experimentation, evaluation, and refinement, with cross-group learning sessions to identify patterns and synergies. The Three Horizons maps provide consistent orientation while allowing for tactical flexibility, which is essential when it is necessary to move simultaneously across multiple conditions.

Early results suggest this approach is generating momentum and network effects that are set to amplify individual efforts. It demonstrates the power of addressing multiple system conditions simultaneously rather than pursuing piecemeal reforms that can be easily set aside or captured by the status quo.

Toward Criteria for Transformative Action

A key challenge now is distinguishing initiatives with real transformative potential from those that end up reinforcing existing systems. For this purpose we have established a practical assessment framework based on 10 H2+ qualities, and their balance with H2- qualities (Ofir et al., 2026a; Ofir et al., 2026b). We are in the process of combining it with five Viable System Model (VSM) qualities. The H2+ qualities clarify which initiatives have a good chance to contribute to transformation, while the VSM qualities test whether the initiative, and its host organization, have the core functions to remain viable and sustain transformative impact over time. Although these criteria still need refinement, they already support more rigorous prioritization and can guide the design of new initiatives to maximize transformative potential and reduce the risk of co-option.

Conclusion: The Urgency of Choice

We opened with an invitation to pause, look honestly at our moment, and choose what evaluation is for and how it can become a vital, visible force for navigating complex challenges.

This paper adds strategic clarity: Living-systems practices are growing—now with the potential to be guided by an aspirational vision that

²³ EvalPartners, the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE), International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS), EvalYouth, EvalIndigenous, and EvalGender+.

²⁴ African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), Asia-Pacific Evaluation Association (APEA), European Evaluation Society (EES), Latin American and Caribbean Network for Monitoring, Evaluation and Systematization (ReLaC).

directly addresses the polycrisis and crosses boundaries into other sectors and fields of work. This implies cultivating an aspirational identity for the field and how it must itself evolve to help the aspirational future emerge and continue to evolve. Our proposed pathways draw on existing strengths, and convergence with the Global Evaluation Agenda 2.0 and Eval4Action as well as emerging partnerships demonstrate that collaborative infrastructure is already forming.

Opportunity now depends less on new ideas than on leadership from those with power to shape demand: commissioners, funders, institutions, and standard-setters within and beyond the aid and development environment. If platforms of actors with powerful incentives, resources, and governance systems can emerge who align with this aspirational vision, our field can become a visible public capability to cultivate mindsets and guide decisions toward a more just humanity and regenerative planet. Such a future also requires alignment beyond our field, working with disciplines and movements traditionally outside the operating space for evaluation—including those working to transform the systems that shape societies and the ecosystems of which they are part.

This moment of reckoning is therefore also a moment of unprecedented opportunity. May we all grasp the invitation in our prelude: dream, participate, connect our work to others, and help build the transformation system that can make this vision real.

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Appendix 1: The Three Horizons Evaluation Initiative (3HEi) Consultation Survey Questions

Horizon 1 – Current Situation

Valuable Elements. Are there aspects of the current evaluation field that we should keep, adapt, and possibly even amplify?

Readiness. Are there aspects of the current evaluation field that indicate that it is currently not fully equipped to address contemporary global challenges?

What Led Us Here. What beliefs, approaches, events, and dynamics do you feel have led to this current situation in the field of evaluation?

Current Trends. What major trends or forces (technological, political, cultural, ecological, economic, social, etc.) do you feel are currently affecting the evaluation field, either positively or negatively?

Horizon 3 – Aspirational future, ten years ahead

Look and Feel 10 years Out. What does the evaluation field and its use look and feel like, now that the challenges you identified in Horizon 1 have been addressed?

Coevolution. What do you see around you that shows that the evaluation field, as you engage in it, is interacting dynamically with emerging global and local aspects of the polycrisis?

Present Seeds. Back to now, what early signs or “seeds” of this aspirational future can you see now, also known as “pockets of the future in the present.”

Horizon 2: - How we get to Horizon 3

Transformative Initiatives. What current initiatives can you see right now that have the potential to transform the evaluation field and move it from Horizon 1 to the aspirational future in Horizon 3?

Future Initiatives. What new initiatives do you feel should be started to help the transformation toward Horizon 3?

Your Contribution. What principles or concepts will guide your work toward H2+ initiatives and help avoid their capture by H1? Please indicate with whom you would like to collaborate.