
Sustainability, Evaluation, and Credentials

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Background: Humanity faces a crisis in environmental sustainability manifested by climate change, species extinction, habitat destruction, and pollution. There is an urgent need to find solutions to address these challenges. While society at large is increasingly recognizing the linkages between human endeavors and environmental degradation, evaluation as a profession and practice is lagging behind because it is singularly focused on addressing only issues related to human well-being and ignoring the natural environment (DeLancey & Rowe, 2023). For evaluation to contribute to resolving this global crisis, the profession must change its mindset and bridge capacity gaps to ensure that sustainability is addressed by all evaluation undertakings, including those that do not have specific natural system outcomes.

Purpose: To enhance the consideration of environmental sustainability in evaluation.

Setting: Global.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: Policy analysis drawing upon stocktakings by the Canadian Evaluation Society and the United Nations Evaluation Group.

Findings: While there is clear demand for sustainability-ready evaluation in which environmental impacts are integrated, a major gap exists between this desire and reality. Stocktakings show that environmental sustainability is rarely addressed by evaluations. For this to happen, a significant adaptation in how evaluation is organized and conducted is needed, and evaluators, commissioners, and evaluation users must address sustainability. Competencies of individual evaluators and firms must be enhanced, but this is not sufficient. Sustainability-ready evaluation requires interdisciplinary competencies and collaboration.

Keywords: *sustainability-ready evaluation; human and natural systems; integration; interdisciplinary; coupled systems; nexus; evaluation competencies*

There can be no doubt that it is increasingly unlikely that humans will take the needed steps to forestall serious environmental sustainability crises.¹ It is safe to say that the root causes of global environmental degradation lie in the human sphere: energy use, urbanization, deforestation, food production, etc. Most human activities have environmental consequences, either negative or positive. The necessary steps toward sustainability transitions (Markard et al., 2020) require changing much of what we do and how we do it.

Fortunately, many of the necessary steps are reasonably well known. The challenges to undertaking them are largely social, economic, political, and cultural, rather than simply technical. This is precisely the type of setting that evaluation has been built for: to assess the value of what we have been and are currently doing and, with logic and evidence, point to options to do better.

Unfortunately, evaluation is not well resourced to contribute toward more effective societal responses that would help us move toward more sustainability. Assessments of the readiness and level of engagement of evaluation to address sustainability were recently reported by the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) and the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES). Together the two assessments show that the evaluation function is not engaged or ready to engage with sustainability, either internationally or nationally, although its importance is increasingly recognized. The overriding focus of evaluation is on human systems, whereas its competence to cover natural systems is limited. Even when addressing climate-related topics evaluation is primarily concerned with matters such as mitigation strategies or developing humans' resilience to climate change. While those matters are important, assessment of the effects of what we do to natural systems now needs to be at the core of all evaluation agendas. Many mitigation or resilience-building efforts may have unforeseen negative impacts elsewhere on the natural environment, which will reduce their long-term sustainability.

So as a field, evaluation can be a useful contributor to the effort to forestall the sustainability crisis. There is ample evidence that to the extent that it has addressed sustainability, evaluation has been a worthwhile ally in the endeavor toward sustainability transitions. This paper considers options to transform global and national evaluation functions to systematically incorporate natural system outcomes into

evaluation. We know that this will require adaptation in our modes of conducting evaluation; in our capacities (knowledge, skills, and experience); and in the tools, methods, and processes that evaluation brings to this critical undertaking. One question this article addresses is whether credentials and certification are useful approaches, and whether there are other options that merit consideration.

One important framing needs to be mentioned at the outset. Our focus is on what we have been calling the *evaluation function*, which might also be named as the *evaluation endeavor*. While what we do as individual planetary citizens or as professional evaluators is important, sustainability requires a collective approach akin to all of government—all of evaluation. Each and every evaluator, evaluation commissioner, and evaluation user who incorporates sustainability in their work is important and very welcome.

In this article we first consider where the evaluation profession stands, in terms of readiness to systematically incorporate environmental sustainability into all evaluation. We also bring attention to important contextual considerations and the readiness of organizations to conduct sustainability-ready evaluations. We then offer some sketches of what a sustainability-ready evaluation endeavor might look like, or at least some key elements of a sustainability-ready evaluation function (Rowe, 2019). We identify some encouraging experiences and current trends. We then consider credentials and certification and some other potential contributors to a sustainability-ready evaluation function against where we are, where evaluation needs to be, and experiences and trends.

Current Level of Sustainability-Readiness of Evaluation

Evaluator competencies lie at the center of the sustainability-readiness—or lack thereof—of evaluation. Evaluation has its roots in applied social sciences and social science research methodology, even if the profession has branched out in different directions (Alkin, 2004). Most evaluation professionals hail from this tradition, with significant influence from disciplines such as education, sociology, and social psychology. Few evaluators have been trained in natural sciences such as ecology or water resources management.

¹ Henceforth when we refer to sustainability we mean environmental sustainability.

Yet, evaluating sustainable development requires an understanding of the natural dynamics of environmental systems. At the same time, scientists working on topics such as the effectiveness of conservation strategies conduct research that is highly evaluative in nature, although it would most often not be identified as such. We argue for evaluation that combines the knowledge and insights from both social and natural sciences. It is necessary for evaluations to identify not only how environmental conditions affect humans but also vice-versa: how human actions impact natural systems—in ways either intended or unintended—and thus affect the long-term sustainability of selected strategies. We recognize that it may not always be possible to invest these capacities in individual evaluators and, therefore, the solution lies in creating multidisciplinary teams for evaluations.

There is increasing demand for sustainability-ready evaluation (Rowe, 2021) in which both human and natural systems are incorporated and where intended and unintended environmental impacts are accounted for (EvalSDGs, 2022). For development evaluation this demand often comes from the headquarters of development agencies. Their normative foundation can be traced back to the Brundtland Report that launched the notion of sustainable development (WCED, 1987) and is currently articulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the attendant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),² which explicitly emphasize the interconnectedness of social, economic and environmental dimensions of development. Many bilateral donors and multilateral agencies today have objectives that are aligned with the SDGs. The Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI)³ established by the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG),⁴ are now cognizant of the need for taking a holistic perspective on sustainability in evaluations. Also, countries such as South Africa are at the forefront of ensuring that environmental considerations are systematically incorporated in all evaluations (Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation, Republic of South Africa [DPME], 2022). Finland was the first country in the world to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of its progress on the 2030 Agenda across all government entities. This evaluation was aimed to enhance policy coherence and to inform

long-term sustainable development in the country (Räkköläinen & Saxén, 2022).

UNEG, an interagency professional network that brings together evaluation units from the UN system, has recognized the need for strengthening how its members address environmental concerns in their evaluations. Emulating the earlier successful efforts to mainstream gender in all evaluations, it established in 2019 a working group to develop guidance to establish a common approach toward incorporating environmental impact in all evaluations, especially those in which the environment is not the main objective.⁵ A stocktaking found that about 60% of the more than 50 agencies have environmental and social safeguards, but that environmental concerns are addressed in a highly inadequate manner in evaluations (UNEG, 2021). The working group has identified nine specific areas where guidance is needed and will be prepared (Todd, 2022). A further review of evaluation reports by UNEG members found that many negative unintended environmental consequences of development interventions could well have been identified had the program proponents had the required expertise or had evaluations of similar earlier interventions covered these impacts. The fact that many if not most of these negative impacts were common to certain types of interventions highlights the importance of adding environmental (including natural science) expertise in teams.

A 2021 Sustainability Working Group report from the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) assessed the readiness of evaluation in Canada to address sustainability (CES 2021). It found that evaluations that consider sustainability and the natural system more generally are infrequent and capacity is limited. Canadian federal government evaluations were until 2016 conducted under the well-developed and longstanding government-wide federal evaluation structure and national evaluation policy that required all policies and programs to be evaluated at least once in a 5-year cycle. (In 2016 the Policy on Results shelved this requirement).⁶ The CES sustainability review examined all evaluations completed between 2016 and 2018 by the evaluation units of departments whose programmatic efforts were judged most likely to raise sustainability issues. A total of 77 evaluations conducted between 2016 and 2018 were carefully reviewed; sustainability was considered by only a few. Even departments whose

² <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

³ <https://www.globalevaluationinitiative.org/>

⁴ <http://unevaluation.org/#>

⁵ Author Juha Uitto has co-coordinated the working group since its inception.

⁶ <https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=31300>

remits addressed natural resources (e.g., Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Natural Resources Canada, and Environment and Climate Change Canada) only considered human systems, such as employment and sector development. Sustainability and natural resources are rarely considered by federal evaluations in Canada (Rowe & DeLancey, 2021). Though it treated them less systematically, the CES stocktaking also considered evaluations commissioned by philanthropic and non-government organizations, finding that they too primarily addressed human-systems matters. The only exceptions were natural-system-focused organizations such as conservation philanthropies, whose evaluations focused on natural systems almost exclusively.

The second major element in the CES stocktaking was a review of the intellectual infrastructure of evaluation in Canada to address sustainability. This included published materials on websites and in North American evaluation journals, conference presentations, and grey literature.⁷ The findings were equally sobering: Under 4% of articles published in four leading North American evaluation journals considered natural resource matters, and only a few of these considered sustainability. Presentations at the conferences of the Canadian and American national evaluation societies painted a similar picture.

The main message from the CES stocktaking is that evaluation in Canada has not incorporated natural systems and sustainability as worthy of consideration. Further, the intellectual infrastructure in Canada and the United States for evaluation of sustainability and natural systems is very limited.⁸

There are two important implications for evaluation from these stocktakings. First, sustainability is a major, if not *the* major, issue of the day. A field with the ambitions of evaluation cannot be seen as relevant if it displays disinterest in the major issue of the day. And as Clark et al. (2006) have well shown, relevance or salience is one of the major determinants of knowledge use. Second, when evaluations ignore important *direct* effects of interventions the work must be regarded

as having bias and falling seriously short on an important remit of evaluation, which is valuing interventions. Ignoring direct natural system effects means that the value of interventions as assessed by evaluation will be wrong. Interestingly this can sometimes result in understating the value of an intervention that has positive environmental effects ignored by the evaluation.⁹

Organizational Readiness

The Paris Agreement of 2015,¹⁰ the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (2022),¹¹ and a continuous stream of more targeted and increasingly dire assessments (e.g., Global Commission on Adaptation, 2019; Swilling, 2018; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2021) all point to the urgency of addressing environmental degradation, climate change, and natural resources depletion. The Global Center on Adaptation (2022) reports that between January 2021 and September 2022, approximately 4% of Africa's population—or 52 million people—were impacted by drought or floods with severe consequences to their livelihoods. A recent study by the World Resources Institute (Searchinger et al., 2023) demonstrates how expansion of agriculture, urbanization, and growth in forest plantations in response to growing demand for food and other products are reducing the area available for carbon sequestration and biodiversity.

For evaluation, working largely with programs, policies, and projects, this urgency has a very concrete reality. The typical project/program cycle is 5 to 7 years, and a large portion of evaluations are undertaken 1 or more years after conclusion. If we take 2030 as a critical milestone, as articulated in the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, we are now basically in the last or next-to-last program cycle before reaching the date. Business-as-usual evaluation has not been addressing sustainability, and even if it started to do so now with interventions starting now, it would be close to 2030 before evaluations would be forthcoming, with any corrective action coming too late. We thus

⁷ For resource considerations this search covered only Canada and the United States, which excludes important European and other sources; it only looked at the period between 2017 and 2019.

⁸ The stocktaking was overseen by Andy Rowe and Debbie DeLancey and was undertaken on a pro bono basis by four leading Canadian evaluation firms: Baastel, Goss Gilroy, Prairie Research, and Universalia. A July 21, 2021, blog post for the EES (Rowe & DeLancey, 2021) provides a brief overview of the work.

⁹ See the Footprint Evaluation Initiative's thought experiment on prisons for an illustration of ignored positive environmental effects from an intervention. <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/footprint-evaluation-thought-experiments> and Davidson et al. (2023).

¹⁰ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

¹¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

need more real-time and formative evaluation that can guide programs and policies during implementation. Guidance prepared for Global Affairs Canada addressing sustainability-inclusive evaluation includes a section on “Rethinking Evaluation” that points to more “urgent” and much more powerfully influential evaluation that is strongly connected to operational decisions about interventions, from their early conceptual phases through design, negotiation, and very early implementation (Rowe & Davidson, 2023).

This is a critical contextual element in pursuing a sustainability-ready evaluation function: The need is urgent, and significant shifts in how evaluation is undertaken are required. One of the most important factors influencing evaluation use is timeliness (Clark et al., 2006)—evaluation needs to provide information, insights, and advice when there are openings in decision processes and when the topics are rising on agendas. And since much of what we do still harms natural systems and worsens prospects for sustainability (International Fund for Agricultural Development Independent Office of Evaluation [IFAD IOE], 2023), then it is reasonable to expect that accelerated adaptive management is required and that evaluation information is most likely to be used when it is provided to support these adaptive management cycles.

Pragmatically this suggests that evaluation functions will need to complement new sustainability guidance and policies with evaluative efforts connected to program operations, often annually and, where needed, on a more frequent cycle. The suite of evaluation methods and tools includes many options for this, so again, the challenge is much less technical and lies much more in how organizations and evaluation commissioners see their remit, and in worldviews that do not recognize the value of natural systems. Fundamentally, contemporary evaluation functions can be described as “rearview-mirror evaluation,” looking to what has been done and achieved (i.e., summative ex-post evaluation). The needed rapid adaptive management needs what we can call “windscreen evaluation” (or forward-looking, developmental evaluation): Is this likely to get us where we need to be for the right systems, and what enhancements are beneficial? The urgency of the need for sustainability-ready evaluators to support windscreen evaluation is an important consideration for the utility of competencies.

Nonetheless, there are important lessons to be learned from organizations that have made progress in systematically addressing environmental impact in their evaluations. The IFAD Independent Office of Evaluation has

gradually institutionalized environmental impact in all its evaluations. Nanthikesan (2021) describes what motivated the organization and what the path was to achieve this. According to him, there needs to be a systemic organization-wide approach to such institutionalization. In IFAD’s case, environmental impact became a shared concern of management, programming units, and the evaluators, as well as the governing body. There was, thus, both top-down and bottom-up demand to develop a system that best served the organization’s needs. IFAD’s senior management realized the threats from environmental degradation and climate change to the livelihoods of the rural poor and the importance of addressing them (Nanthikesan, 2021).

South Africa’s Department of Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) has recently released guidance requiring that environmental sustainability is addressed in all evaluations (DPME, 2022). This is a world-leading step that provides a global template for other nations. As in many countries, in South Africa there is a handful of consulting outfits and individual evaluators, in both the public (e.g., universities) and private sectors, ready and capacitated to address sustainability. The pool is still too small, and implementation of the new DPME guidelines that reflects their intent will be essential for evaluations to address sustainability in evaluations of initiatives that do not have specific environmental outcomes. The new DPME guidelines direct commissioners to do so. However, there is also a need to broaden the pool of sustainability-ready evaluation organizations and individuals. This is similar to the situation some multilateral organizations and Canadian federal evaluation units find themselves in.

Currently, the pool of evaluators and evaluation firms with environmental (especially natural science) expertise is rather limited. For higher-level thematic or programmatic evaluations conducted by central evaluation offices, such as those of the Global Environmental Facility Independent Evaluation Office (GEF IEO, 2017 & 2021), the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, or IFAD (IFAD IOE, 2023), it is easier to pull together teams consisting of evaluation office staff and consultants than to commission an evaluation to a firm. These evaluation units have larger resources and can draw upon expertise vested in individual consultants and outfits based anywhere in the world. The situation is much more challenging when evaluations are the responsibility of decentralized units and are carried out at the country level. This is the case for most project-level evaluations in many organizations. Country offices of development agencies rely on a very limited cadre of national evaluators, many of

whom often have a narrow client base in the country, specializing in developing and evaluating projects for one or two resident organizations. As most such organizations are focused on human systems in the development or humanitarian spheres, these consultants are almost exclusively also experts in the same.¹² Furthermore, the program staff in the country offices of major UN agencies and bilateral donors also tend to have social science backgrounds, which limits their view of natural systems when they develop terms of reference and commission evaluations.

In other cases, where the focus is primarily on the natural environment, teams may lack social science expertise. A review of UNEP's contributions to poverty reduction revealed that the agency did not systematically include formal assessments of the needs of poor and vulnerable groups in project design, nor were stakeholder needs necessarily followed through in project implementation or M&E. The links between environment-related objectives and poverty are often not made explicit (Spilsbury, 2020). The issue is that both are needed for sustainability-ready evaluation.

Even in the case of central evaluation units, the narrow human resource base specializing in evaluations in the nexus of human and natural systems is visible, in that you will often find the same individuals on the various evaluation teams working for a number of multilateral and bilateral agencies. The positive effect is that these professionals know and trust each other and have common approaches. On the other hand, there is a concrete risk of turning this into a niche field for an exclusive group of evaluators. There is also a risk of specific approaches and methodologies becoming entrenched and the demand far outstripping supply.

Often larger evaluations such as those described above are undertaken by an evaluation team that includes members with capacities in the specific topic (e.g., types of agriculture) and is collectively able to consider human dimensions (e.g., livelihoods, gender, Indigenous interests and worldviews, institutions) and natural systems (water management, effects of farming practices on natural systems, options such as agroforestry) and locales and landscapes (arid, mountainous, pastoral, water inundated) and so on. The evaluation team is sustainability-ready, while any given member of the team will be less so. Teams such as this are more frequent for the larger evaluations undertaken by agencies such as

described above or larger bilateral and philanthropic organizations. Footprint evaluation,¹³ a project under the GEI, addresses this for smaller evaluations with the inclusion of a "boundary spanner" on the evaluation team—someone who has experience and knowledge and relations with the natural science domains (or sometimes, for natural system interventions, to human social science domains) and whose role it is to facilitate bringing the needed knowledge to the evaluation (Goodrich et al., 2020).

We are also starting to see national directives whereby all new submissions require responses to a series of challenging questions to elucidate effects on sustainability of natural resources and the environment. For example, the Treasury Board of Canada includes the following guidance for submissions:

- Does the proposal have outcomes that will affect natural resources? (consider: a) Will it affect resource usage such as arable land, forest, etc.; b) Will it affect the consumption of materials and production of waste?; c) Will measures be taken to encourage reduction, reuse, and recycling of materials?)
- Does the proposal have a known direct or likely indirect outcome that is expected to have considerable impacts on the environment (i.e., a) land, water and air, including all layers of the atmosphere; b) all organic and inorganic matter and living organisms; c) the interacting natural systems that include components referred to in paragraph a and b.)?
- Does the proposal have outcomes which are likely to affect the achievement of Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (FSDS) goals and targets (e.g., reducing Greenhouse Gas emissions, green procurement and sustainability of work operations)? (Government of Canada, n.d., Environmental and Sustainable Development Requirements Appendix)

Optimistically, one might hope that evaluations of newly approved interventions conducted under the existing Canada Policy on Results would at least adhere to these new directives. Realistically it is unlikely, considering how many iterations it has

¹² This observation is confirmed by an internal analysis by the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office.

¹³

https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/themes/footprint_evaluation

taken to start to get gender or Indigenous interests systematically considered.¹⁴

Worldviews and mindsets are important in shaping the almost singular focus of evaluation on human systems, and for that matter the focus of economics and other social science disciplines. The underlying cause is the worldview of human dominion over other people, species, and things. Dominion also underpins colonial worldviews. Fortunately, other worldviews offer perspectives that are better suited to sustainability; for example, in many Indigenous worldviews humans have stewardship responsibilities for other humans, our non-human relatives, and other things.¹⁵ Sustainability-ready evaluation recognizes and addresses the value of natural systems (our non-human relatives and other things) and respects all interests associated with those natural as well as human systems in determining the value of interventions, and in undertaking evaluations. This is not an either/or mindset as in “you can have development or environment” or “you can have equity or employment.” Although the goal is to find synergies that benefit both people and nature, trade-offs and compromises—either conscious or unintended—may sometimes be necessary (GEF IEO, 2018), in which case evaluators must point these out.

Incorporating sustainability into evaluation will require adapting our customary focus on the spatial and temporal scales considered relevant to the human interests involved with the intervention. Natural systems have very different temporal and spatial scales, frequently longer and wider (Birnbaum & Mickwitz, 2009). This will require evaluation to incorporate methods and tools and information sources compatible with these multiple temporal and spatial scales and including events and results precipitated by the intervention and occurring in the future (windscreen evaluation). The key evaluation questions developed by the Footprint Evaluation Initiative show how evaluation questions can be adapted to embrace differing temporal and spatial scales from addressing sustainability (Davidson & Rowe, 2022).

¹⁴ See <https://cutt.ly/15-18-21>, which documents that fewer than 10% of 2021 federal evaluation reports in a sample of 32 addressed sustainability and gave less than 1% of their report space to it on average.

¹⁵ See for example Global Optimism (<https://www.globaloptimism.com/>), founded by Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, who directed the Paris Agreement negotiations.

Will Competencies / Credentials Do It?

Canada has a well-developed competencies and credentialing system that CES initiated and operates.¹⁶ The original structures were put in place in 2008 and updated in 2018. Incorporating sustainability was one of the considerations in the update. Here we focus on the 2018 version and use the example of Canada because it is the most developed and longest running system globally and is showcased widely.

The CES approach to competencies has five domains and 36 specific competencies in these domains.¹⁷ To demonstrate competence at a level to obtain a Credentialed Evaluator (CE) certification one must show competence in 70% of the competencies in each of the five domains. The 2018 revisions clarified the previous rather vague natural systems competencies with the resulting two competencies that refer to natural systems:

In Domain 1, Reflective Practice, one of nine competencies: (1.4) *Considers the well-being of human and natural systems in evaluation practice.*

In Domain 3, Situational Practice, one of seven competencies: (3.1) *Examines and responds to the multiple human and natural contexts within which the program is embedded.*

The two competencies referring to natural systems do not need to be addressed by applicants for the credential, since the 70% threshold translates to addressing six of nine competencies in Domain 1 and five of seven competencies in Domain 3. Given that the CES stocktaking showed clearly that sustainability and natural systems are not covered by professional development opportunities and professional literature, there is little route for an evaluator to satisfy either of the competencies. More importantly, satisfying these rather vague competencies cannot be taken to seriously mean that an evaluator is ready to address sustainability and natural systems in their work. Rather they are viewed as a precipitator to raise awareness and encourage the interest of

¹⁶ The *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* has frequently addressed competencies and credentials, including in two special issues (Podens & King, 2014; Buchanan & Kuji-Shikatani, 2015) available at <https://www.utpjournals.press/loi/cjpe>. The 2014 issue includes articles from New Zealand, South Africa, and Russia as well as Canada. Rowe (2014) is part of this issue.

¹⁷ Reduced from 49 in the 2018 revisions.

evaluators.¹⁸ This does not mean that competencies could not be structured so as to actually prepare an evaluator to be ready to be part of an evaluation that incorporates sustainability, though it is unlikely that they could prepare one to be the leader of such an evaluation.

Attaining the status of Credentialed Evaluator also requires a graduate degree or a graduate certificate in program evaluation and certification that at least 2 of the past 10 years of work have been in program evaluation as well as satisfying the 70% in each domain described above. And to renew a certification one must have demonstrated at least 40 hours of professional development over the past 3 years. It is hard to imagine, even if the interest of an evaluator were precipitated by the two competencies that include natural systems, that they would be able to find professional development training in sustainability and evaluation or that the few hours of training would lead to their readiness.¹⁹

Clearly, the revised CES competencies will do little to develop a sustainability-rich cadre of evaluators in Canada. This does not mean the competencies or credentialing cannot contribute. But clearly with the limited intellectual infrastructure and the historical disinterest in human systems it is very unlikely that competencies or credentials will be a viable contributor to developing a sustainability-ready pool of evaluators, especially under the more urgent time frames that are required. This description of the Canadian competencies is a sobering message for the potential of competencies to address the important shortfall in sustainability-ready evaluators globally.

Summary

Environmental sustainability is in question and requires urgent and effective actions globally to avert the impending crises in most natural systems. Humans draw heavily from natural systems and have long and systematically brought harm to them. Indeed, there is little that humans do that does not leave a deposit on some natural system, and thus the interventions to which evaluations are applied are very likely to be harming natural systems to varying degrees.

We now have solid knowledge that evaluation has not shown much interest in natural systems or

sustainability except as threats that humans need to be protected from. Indeed, at national and global levels the overriding focus of evaluation has been and still is on humans. This worldview where natural systems are not seen as having value in themselves is pervasive and comes directly to evaluation through social sciences that are heavily imbued with this “dominion”-shaped worldview that sees only instrumental value for the environment and natural resources. A direct implication that should be especially concerning to evaluators is that our efforts to assess the value of interventions are systematically deficient, excluding even direct effects on natural systems.

For evaluation to contribute to improving efforts toward sustainability that encompasses progress for humans while ensuring the maintenance of the environmental base will require important adaptation in how we organize evaluation and especially in the pace of evaluations and in the application of existing evaluation and natural science tools, approaches, and processes together. Evaluators, commissioners, and evaluation users must take an interest in sustainability and ensure that sustainability is addressed by all evaluation undertakings, including those that do not have specific natural system outcomes.

There is clearly a competency gap. Few evaluators or evaluation outfits have even minimal capacities in natural sciences; even fewer could be described as sustainability-ready. Unfortunately, the intellectual infrastructure for evaluation of environmental sustainability and natural systems is highly deficient, and there is little in the way of professional development, professional literature, conference presence, or guidance. One important approach to capacity gaps is for teams to be formed with evaluation and natural science competence and knowledge, or with access to these through boundary spanning, so we do not have to wait for individual evaluators to gain sufficient knowledge of natural systems, or natural scientists to gain sufficient knowledge of evaluation. And we should be mindful that many evaluations are conducted by evaluation divisions that are housed in organizations that also have environmental divisions that can help address the gap.

Competencies and certifications that specifically require demonstrated competency in natural systems would start to build necessary capacities, but it will take considerable time,

¹⁸ Personal interviews with selected key members of CES credentialing and competencies processes.

¹⁹ The International Program on Development Evaluation Training (ipdet.org) now includes a 2.5-day

workshop called Evaluating at the Nexus of Environment and Development, developed by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office.

especially since the intellectual infrastructure is so weak and there are so few sustainability-ready evaluators. These approaches will not be providing sustainability-ready evaluation cadres in time to contribute to achieving the aims of the Paris Agreement or other targets slated for 2030.

Competencies might in general point the field to sustainability as a needed direction, but we should not expect much in the way of returns from this until 2030 has come and gone. Fortunately, we have other avenues for the entire evaluation undertaking to build its capacity to usefully contribute to averting the sustainability crises.

Indeed, other approaches, such as evaluation teams that have the necessary competencies, either through engaging natural scientists as members or by using boundary-spanning concepts for smaller and less well-resourced evaluations to access the needed knowledge and capacities, may be more important. In both these scenarios we should not assume that the teams will be evaluation teams per se; it is very likely that we will see natural science teams bringing in social science and evaluation members. And we should expect significant growth in evaluations addressing sustainability, which will provide market opportunities, which along with growing awareness and concern will prove to incentivize evaluators to gain capacities and training organizations to provide training and other ways of developing a sustainability-ready evaluation capacity.

Finally, it is not entirely up to evaluators themselves to change the practice. There is a need to change the demand for sustainability-ready evaluation. It is essential that policy makers, program proponents, and evaluation commissioners internalize the need for assessing sustainability and the environmental costs of interventions, so that these considerations are mainstreamed in all evaluations. This is already happening in places—as demonstrated above in the cases from Canada, South Africa, and Finland, as well as the UN. Ultimately, there is a growing awareness and demand from civil society and people at large for our policies and programs to minimize harm to the environment.

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