

Building Spaces for Dialogues to Rethink Evaluator Competencies: Lessons from the Webinars Organized by the Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions

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Background: There is a need to rethink evaluator competencies given the harsh and paralyzing realities of COVID-19. The pandemic necessitated balancing diverse perspectives, given the limited scientific evidence that existed to guide actions during a genuinely unprecedented time. In September and October 2021, the Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions (TECCHI), in partnership with the Asia Pacific Evaluation Association (APEA), organized a three-part webinar series in response to the multiple issues that surfaced during COVID-19, with specific attention to the implications of the pandemic for rethinking evaluator competencies and evaluator training. The presenters were from multiple countries including India, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa.

Purpose: The presenters pushed for more responsive evaluation approaches to address inequities and sustainability, and for a decolonized approach to knowledge

Keywords: *rethinking competencies; evaluator competencies; pandemic; inequities; sustainability; development interventions; anti-colonialism*

building. The webinars raised a number of themes that have potential implications for future discussions on evaluator competencies, including enhancing evaluation's contributions to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), rethinking evaluation criteria, embracing and addressing various uncertainties, focusing on diversity and heterogeneity, understanding the role of contexts in complex programs and policies, reconceptualizing sustainability, being more explicit about inequities and vulnerabilities, and paying attention to systems and system dynamics.

Setting: The webinars were organized by TECCHI and APEA on a Zoom platform.

Intervention/ Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis/Findings: Not applicable.

In the fall of 2021 (September to October), the Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions (TECCHI), in partnership with the Asia Pacific Evaluation Association (APEA), organized a three-part webinar series in response to the multiple issues that surfaced during COVID-19, with a specific focus on the implications of the pandemic for rethinking evaluator competencies and evaluator training.

The three sessions¹ were titled as follows:

- Rethinking Evaluator Competencies in an Age of Discontinuity: Evaluation’s Response to the Pandemic
- Rethinking Evaluation Criteria at the Policy Level: Implications of Inequities and Sustainability for Training Policy Evaluators
- Models of Evaluation Training for Evaluators for 2021

Each of the three webinars featured presentations by leading evaluation scholars and practitioners. In some cases, policy makers and implementers also joined and presented in the webinars; this was prompted by a growing conviction that rethinking evaluator competencies needs to include users of evaluation and evaluative thinking. Each of the webinars was well attended, with participants from multiple countries and continents. Some of the authors in this volume also presented in these webinars.

The topics and questions probed in the webinars included:

- *Embracing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*: The SDGs provide a remarkable opportunity for the entire field of evaluation to prove its salience and utility. What kinds of evaluation skills can help practitioners promote an understanding of sustainable impacts and focus on “no one left behind” to help contribute to enhancing evaluation’s contributions to achieving the SDGs?
- *Rethinking evaluation criteria*: In light of the pandemic, do we need to revisit evaluation criteria by which we judge the success of our interventions? What are the training implications for revisiting evaluation criteria?
- *Embracing and addressing uncertainties*: How can evaluators be better trained to represent and communicate uncertainties?
- *Focus on diversity and heterogeneity*: Much of our dialogue around evaluator competencies is

occurring at a time when we are facing deep discussions and divides around inequities, hierarchies, and privilege: How can evaluators help enhance greater voice and inclusiveness in understanding the impacts of programs and policies? How can an evaluative focus on diverse voices and heterogeneous mechanisms of change help facilitate an “ecology of solutions” that work for diverse populations?

- *Understanding the role of contexts in complex programs and policies*: The existing tools to understand the architectures of complex programs and policies are quite limited. How do we promote understanding of theories of change for complex interventions? How do we build competencies in understanding the role of contexts in making a difference to impacts? How do we more clearly represent and analytically understand the role of multiple contexts in the success of policies and programs?
- *Reconceptualizing sustainability*: How can a definition of sustainability include an understanding of both human and natural systems? How can the competencies of evaluators to think theoretically about change include knowledge of both human and natural systems?
- *Inequities and vulnerabilities*: How do we train evaluators to be responsive to the realities of widespread inequities and the amplification of vulnerabilities during the pandemic?
- *Systems and system dynamics*: What programs of work can help build evaluation capacities in the broader ecosystem? How can such programs of work help build capacities at the organizational level so that capacities are sustained even if key individuals leave organizations?

Motivations for the Webinars

TECCHI and APEA had been working together on cutting-edge issues related to the complexities of development in South Asia. Both TECCHI and APEA were especially interested in exploring cutting-edge issues related to the meaning of the discontinuities caused by the pandemic for evaluation’s role in promoting sustainable development. Many of the key themes that framed this issue of *JMDE* were discussed in the webinars.

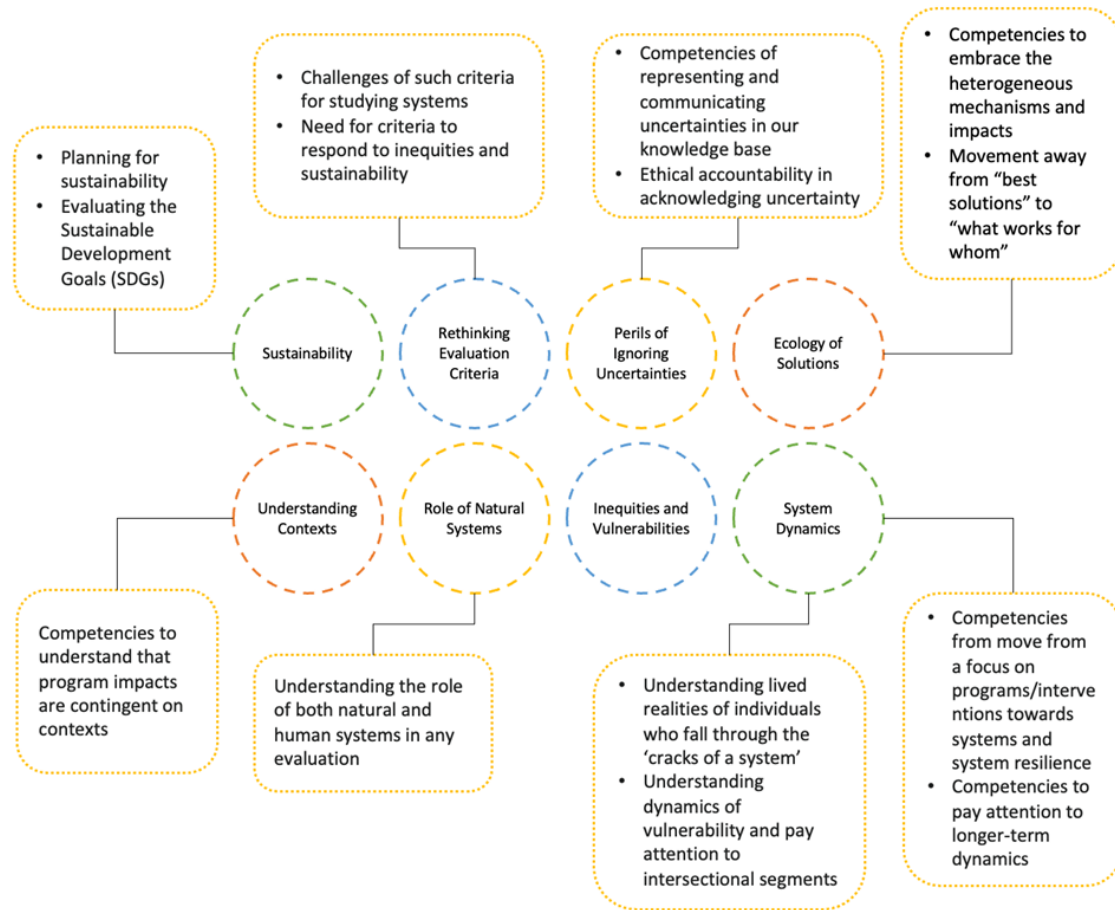
Some of the key substantive themes that shaped the discussion of the webinars—and some

¹ All three sessions are available, along with their associated slides, at

of the learnings from the webinars that we believe have implications for the field—are summarized in

this section (see Figure 1). The themes correspond to the questions discussed in the above section.

Figure 1. Some Key Themes from the Webinars



Sustainable Development and Planning for Sustainability

We remain unconvinced that evaluators, as a field, are trained to think explicitly about sustainability and sustainable impacts (Sridharan & Nakaima, 2019). There was a need for a more focused discussion of how evaluator competencies could encourage greater focus on planning for sustainability and sustainable impacts, especially in contexts that are very dynamic. In a recent paper (Sridharan & Nakaima, 2019), we suggested that evaluators need to play a role in planning for sustainability. This paper argued that planning for sustainability changes the design and implementation of the intervention and essentially involves evaluative thinking:

Decisions about sustainability often need to be made well before the evaluation provides evidence of impacts—this is because, as noted above, realistic timelines of impacts are often not considered in planning evaluations (Cook, 2000) and because decision-making cycles by policymakers may not be aligned with the timing of evaluation results (Leviton & Hughes, 1981). Hence, planning for sustainability needs to happen much earlier, and we argue that planning for sustainability should be an integral part of what we consider to be a useful theory of change. This is important because incorporating planning for sustainability can change the nature of the program itself (Sridharan & Gillespie, 2004). (Sridharan & Nakaima, 2019, p. 378)

Rethinking Evaluation Criteria

A number of very specific challenges emerged during COVID-19 that challenged our thinking on whether the evaluation criteria that are recommended by organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and inform a lot of evaluation practice will suffice (Patton, 2021; Sridharan, 2020). The OECD (2019) has recommended the following evaluation criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, impact, sustainability, and coherence. In our work on maternal health in India and homelessness in Toronto, we felt there needed to be other criteria, such as nimbleness and adaptiveness, to help understand and learn about how different interventions/systems were responding to the pandemic (Sridharan, 2020). These challenges can be expressed in questions such as: How can other evaluation criteria, such as adaptiveness and nimbleness of systems to respond to sudden challenges, be measured? Are the existing evaluation criteria suitable for studying interventions that are fluid and complex? What are evaluator competencies that promote an understanding of the connections between interventions and the underlying systems?

Heider (2017) has made a persuasive case for rethinking evaluation criteria:

Do these issues really necessitate a Copernican shift in the evaluation field that would require questioning the established five evaluation criteria? Are the criteria so inflexible that they can't be adapted as they are to address these challenges? Does this even matter for anyone else, other than the nerdy evaluators and their jargon-filled reports? I say yes to all three questions. (para. 10)

Patton (2021) makes the very persuasive argument for moving beyond mechanical approaches to evaluation criteria and for the dire need to move beyond business as usual. We concur with his view that even the revised criteria do little to address the urgency of problems:

The criteria for judging any intervention should be developed in the context of and aligned with the purpose of a specific evaluation and information needs of primary intended users. This article concludes that the greatest danger for evaluators in times of turbulence is not the turbulence—it is to act with yesterday's criteria. (p. 59; emphasis in original)

How can a dialogue around evaluation competencies promote a focus on *today's* criteria and respond to the challenges of the pandemic and the need to address inequities and sustainability?

The Perils of Ignoring Uncertainties

Perhaps most importantly, the preoccupation with saying what works or what does not work has often failed to represent and communicate *uncertainties* that might exist in the knowledge base. As a field, evaluation could do a much better job of representing, estimating, and communicating uncertainties. Schwandt (2019) has argued for ethical accountability in acknowledging uncertainty in evaluators' work:

The failure to acknowledge uncertainty and complexity is not simply a technical error but also an ethical one. It is an ethical failure when we fail to take responsibility for our knowing. Ethics is not something that is supplementary to our understanding of the world. Ethics is always already part of what we do. (p. 326)

Patton (2021) has argued for the urgency of coming to terms with the uncertainties of a post-normal world:

Responding to the systemic threats of the pandemic and climate emergency requires audacity: emergency responses, by definition, disrupt business as usual mindsets, modalities, and methods. Yet, policy makers have yet to grasp the nettle, and evaluators had been mostly going about their evaluations in a business as usual mode, at least until the pandemic ended the pretense that "normal" was a viable future and pushed the whole world into uncertainty about what the future holds. We now live and work in a business as unusual world, a postnormal world, a global emergency world, a time-is-running-out world. (p. 61)

While different evaluation competency frameworks do acknowledge the importance of uncertainty and ambiguity, we think responding to multiple dimensions of uncertainties will increasingly be central to our training as evaluators. How can a rethinking of evaluator competencies more centrally address the importance of acknowledging and planning to address the challenges of uncertainties in our knowledge?

Toward an Ecology of Solutions: A Focus on Diverse Voices and Heterogeneous Needs

Working on multiple complex problems also helped raise questions on evaluators' preoccupation with finding homogeneous, standardized solutions. The realist evaluation call on "what works for whom" (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) became even sharper during the pandemic. We, the authors, recognized even more strongly during COVID-19 that there was a need to move from singular "best practice" solutions toward a focus on diverse solutions that consider "what works for whom." Pritchett and Woolcock have written about the difference between "the solution" and diverse *solutions* in the context of development:

If the incessant quest for the solution is, in fact, the problem, development professionals need to help create the conditions under which genuine experiments to discern the most appropriate local solutions to local problems can be nurtured and sustained, while also seeing them as a necessary part of a broader and more holistic country development strategy. (2004, p. 207)

Much of our training as evaluators has implicitly assumed that "homogeneous" standardized solutions would work.

Addressing challenging problems like maternal mortality, food insecurity, and nutrition will require more than a singular solution; an *ecology of solutions* tailored to the needs of specific contexts may be needed. Further, such solutions have an essential dynamic long-term aspect, because it is unlikely that solutions to such difficult problems can be found solely with quick fixes. As a field, we need to shift our focus from the more commonly addressed question "Does intervention x work?" to "What does it take to solve a problem in specific contexts?" Relatively recent approaches like *Developmental Evaluation* (Patton, 2010) and *Principles-Focused Evaluation* (Patton, 2017) offer considerable promise in terms of providing insights on evaluation as a means of finding diverse solutions in specific contexts.

How could evaluator competencies help us focus on both the multiple diverse contexts of individuals (Shah et al., 2021) and the need for a diversity of local solutions? How can evaluators be trained to throw better light on the heterogeneities of solutions that would be needed to address diverse needs across different contexts?

Embracing Understanding of Contexts More Deeply

An important insight from realist evaluation (Pawson, 2013; Pawson & Tilley, 1997) is that it is not the interventions themselves that bring about change; rather, it is interventions in the right context and conditions that can trigger the program mechanisms that bring about change. Yet, as we work on the complex problems of housing and health in different settings, we are struck by how we could do much more as a field to focus on the multiple dimensions of contexts and support structures in the planning, implementation, and sustainability of interventions. In a recent paper, we and our colleagues argued that iterative learning is critical in understanding what we termed the five I's of contexts: "Infrastructural, Institutional, Interpersonal, Individual, and Intersectional" (Pawson et al., 2004; Shah et al., 2021). Some questions for reflection that emerged in multiple webinars include: Has our practice been sensitive to contexts? How do we know that we have been careful in considering contexts? And how do we train evaluators to better understand contexts?

Moving Beyond Human Systems

Evaluation as a field has been largely preoccupied with human systems to the neglect of natural systems. Uitto has presented this persuasive insight on what we need to learn from the pandemic:

If there is one conclusion from both the pandemic and the climate-related disasters, it is that societies remain extremely vulnerable to natural hazards. Irrespective of how sophisticated our societies become, we do not control the forces of nature that can wreak tremendous havoc upon us, and our technological and governance systems are not able to cope. It is clear that humans remain a part of the broader ecosystem and completely dependent on it. We need transformational change that will modify how we interact with the natural environment and with one another. (2021, p. 100)

Some critical questions for rethinking evaluator competencies in light of the above insight include: How can evaluator competencies contribute to such transformational change? How can a consideration of both natural and human systems be part of our training? This has huge consequences for the practice of evaluation. For example, as Uitto (2019) observes, "The

experiences highlight the need for understanding the complex dynamic systems in which the interventions operate and interact. Theory-based evaluations must incorporate the broader system and not be constrained to the internal logic of the intervention” (p. 49).

Inequities and Vulnerabilities

A number of challenges to evaluation surfaced as we explored the vulnerabilities that were amplified by the pandemic. For example: Do the proposed solutions incorporate the lived realities of individuals who “fall through the cracks” of a system? Are the systems, structures, and processes being set up to address the needs of individuals and communities consistent with the needs and expectations of those individuals and communities they are intending to serve? Does the proposed solution pay attention to the dynamics of vulnerability that might be especially acute for marginalized individuals and communities, both mid- and post-pandemic? Interventions and system-reform efforts focused on achieving the SDGs will need to pay closer attention to problems of inequities, heterogeneities of contexts, and finding solutions that can have sustainable impacts. Addressing problems of inequities will require a focus on what “works for whom under what conditions” as well as attention to the heterogeneous needs of different intersectional segments. As a field, we have not done enough to bring a sufficient focus to problems of inequities (Sridharan et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2017) and to highlight how the competencies to address inequities can be developed among evaluators.

Systems and System Dynamics

As we witnessed the collapse of systems in multiple settings during the pandemic, how can the evaluator’s gaze move from a focus on projects and interventions toward system-level capacities and resilience? In our experience, most evaluations focus primarily on projects and interventions; there is limited focus on understanding systems and system-level resilience. There is also a need to pay greater attention to dynamics. There is a tendency for the focus of evaluation to be on making judgments over the short run. As a field, we have paid limited attention to problems of longer-term dynamics (Woolcock, 2009). While there is growing interest in evaluating complex interventions, there is still a fairly limited focus on understanding anticipated dynamics of systems. COVID-19 has highlighted the need to understand

non-linearities in systems change (Anser et al., 2022). What can we do as a field to build the competencies to better understand systems and the dynamics of systems?

Description of the Webinars

Tables 1 to 3 describe the webinar presenters and presentation topics and highlight some of the key points made in the three webinars. In general, the presenters pushed for more responsive evaluation approaches to address inequities and sustainability and for a decolonized approach to knowledge building. The presenters were from multiple countries including India, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa.

We do not provide a comprehensive summary of the presentations but highlight a few points that might serve as a call to action to rethink evaluator competencies in light of the pandemic.

One important focus of multiple presentations was the need to rethink what it meant to learn during uncertain times. There were calls to build competencies for newer approaches to learning. For example, Tom Schwandt’s presentation highlighted the need to build competencies for epistemic fluency. Markauskaite and Goodyear (2017) define epistemic fluency this way:

Working on real-world problems usually requires the combination of different kinds of specialised and context-dependent knowledge, as well as different ways of knowing. People who are flexible and adept with respect to different ways of knowing about the world can be said to possess epistemic fluency. (p. 1)

In a post-pandemic world, how does one build the competencies for evaluators to be epistemically fluent? How can the competencies of different ways of knowing be developed?

Tom Schwandt also argued for the need to develop competencies for ethical and political fluency. Key points from his presentation included:

- Developing ethical fluency involves developing moral expertise and capacity for normative analysis. It is the competency to state and clarify moral questions, and provide justified answers to those questions.
- Moral expertise involves conceptualizing and elaborating on the meaning of norms, values and ends that are at stake in a particular intervention.
- Developing political fluency means that evaluators focus on the political dimensions of

acting and learning, as well as learning to deal with policy discord and moral disharmony.

There were calls to build competencies to understand what communities value. Trish Newport spoke about the challenges of delivering health care in war zones in Mosul, Iraq, and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

We need to ask: What are the priorities of the people and communities we are designing and setting up interventions for? And then ask: Do you want our help in responding to those priorities? In the case of the Ebola outbreak in the DRC, we learned that Ebola was not the main priority of the communities at the time. The priorities were building wells and having access to clean water. Similarly, with COVID, there were different priorities in the community at the time.

The presentations in the webinar have implications for rethinking competencies related to methods. For example, Ray Pawson called for attention to complexity dynamics as places and programs adapted and rebounded from the pandemic, and for attention to critical features of systems, including complexity, adaptations, and “self-transformation.” There were a number of other presentations on building evaluator competencies for taking a systems approach to real-world problems. While there is a rich literature around systems approaches in evaluation, there has been a far more limited discussion on how system evaluation approaches can help understand how the resilience of places can be developed, especially in light of the pandemic.

Another important insight was that COVID could have weakened evaluation systems and the ability to monitor and evaluate changes in equities. Consider Benita Williams’s call to pay attention to the implications of COVID for evaluation systems: “This disruption is going to continue for a longer time. Our evaluation systems are going to become more fragile. This has implications for equity and diversity.” A critical need going forward is to pay

attention to how evaluator competencies can be strengthened to address equities. Given the centrality of addressing inequities for the Sustainable Development Goals, there is a need to explore how evaluation systems can be strengthened to address the SDGs’ promise to leave no one left behind. Consider these observations by Madhu Khetan:

M&E has been largely project-focused / project-driven. It has been less focused on unravelling and bringing to light new vulnerabilities or rising inequities. To do this requires more independence in framing the M&E agenda, enlarging the scope to not only look at program activities but also new issues that may have arisen.... Any assumptions we make about the context may no longer be valid. An understanding of the change context becomes very important as well as factoring this into our evaluations.

There were also calls to better understand the historical contexts of interventions and development. Eugene Richardson posed the following questions: How do we become anti-colonialist? How have colonial and imperial legacies led to a structured disposition that leads people to act in the ways they do? How do we get people to understand these structured dispositions? How do we get people to understand the colonial mechanisms that are still built into what we do?

There were also calls to pay attention to the implications of language in our work. Eugene Richardson challenged participants to be more careful about language in evaluation. “Words can do symbolic violence (e.g., outbreak, superspreader)... We need to really interrogate the categories that we use as part of our impact evaluations to see what kinds of ideological work that they are doing.”

As noted, the above descriptions are not a comprehensive summary of the webinars but only highlight a few key learnings from the webinars.

Table 1. Description of Webinar 1, “Rethinking Evaluator Competencies in an Age of Discontinuity: Evaluation’s Response to the Pandemic”

Presentation / Presenter	Examples of Learnings
COVID, Complexity, Counterfactuals, & Calamitous Conclusions: A Provocation <i>Ray Pawson</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons of the pandemic for policymakers: Remember you are designing complex, adaptive, self-transformative systems. The key task is to try to anticipate the complexity dynamics. • Lessons of the pandemic for evaluators: Remember you are researching complex, adaptive, self-transformative systems. The key task is to try to trace the complexity dynamics.
Evaluation’s Response to the Pandemic <i>Benita Williams</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing evaluation competencies is a systems thing! • Erosion of the settings for capacity building as a result of the pandemic. This disruption is going to continue for a longer time. Our evaluation systems are going to become more fragile. This has implications for equity and diversity.
A Program Designer’s Response to the Pandemic: A View from an Indian Lens <i>Madhu Khetan</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pandemic has given rise to different vulnerabilities and inequities (e.g., In India, the lockdown prompted a flood of reverse migration). It has also brought about many changes in the functioning of public systems and the services we assumed would always be available. • Any assumptions we make about the context may no longer be valid. An understanding of the change context becomes very important as well as factoring this into our evaluations. • M&E has been largely project-focused / project-driven. It has been less focused on unravelling and bringing to light new vulnerabilities or rising inequities. To do this requires more independence in framing the M&E agenda, enlarging the scope to look not only at program activities but also at new issues that may have arisen. • COVID-19 has spurred us to look at the need to use data for developmental purposes for internal learning. For this, acceptance of data both within the organization and outside becomes very important. Building collaboration thus becomes very important, and all the skills that are required for building collaboration assume a much greater significance.
The “Other” Competencies for Effective Practice & Pandemic Response <i>Rogers Mutie</i>	<p>Three broad domains of additional competencies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational competencies • Enabling competencies • Foundational competencies
Evaluation Competencies in the Age of Discontinuity <i>Tom Schwandt</i>	<p>There is a need for five types of competencies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage the broader architecture of evaluating practices • Do collaborative knowledge work • Expand the repertoire of questions evaluators ask • Develop epistemic fluency • Develop ethical and political fluency

Table 2. Description of Webinar 2, “Rethinking Evaluation Criteria at the Policy Level: Implications of Inequities and Sustainability for Training Policy Evaluators”

Presentation / Presenter	Examples of Learnings
<p>Whose Priorities? Reflections from Ebola and Covid Contexts in DRC <i>Trish Newport</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We need to ask: What are the priorities of the people and communities we are designing and setting up interventions for? And then ask: Do you want our help in responding to those priorities? In the case of the Ebola outbreak in the DRC, we learned that Ebola was not the main priority of the communities at the time. The priorities were building wells and having access to clean water. Similarly with COVID, there were different priorities in the community at the time.
<p>Epidemic Illusions: On The Coloniality of Global Public Health <i>Eugene Richardson</i> Rethinking Evaluation Criteria at the Policy Level <i>Sonalde Desai</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Words can do symbolic violence (e.g., outbreak, superspreader). We need to really interrogate the categories that we use as part of our impact evaluations to see what kinds of ideological work that they are doing. We need to think about ways to build rapport with the people whom we are trying to talk to and get information from. There may be different ways of doing this. But the idea that we are going into communities to simply extract data is not going to work Inequalities are not stable; they change and they are contextual. While there is a stable element to vulnerabilities, we also need to pay attention to the changing component of inequality.
<p>The Need for Additional Criteria <i>Natalia Kosheleva</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rethinking evaluation criteria in light of issues of inequities and sustainability—needs additional criteria such as reach and potential for national/local replication
<p>An Evaluator’s Journey and Response: Responding to Inequities, Vulnerabilities and Answering Sustainability During COVID 19 <i>Kultar Singh</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empathy as an evaluator criteria. When we are talking to frontline workers, we need to be appreciative of the work that they are doing, give them time and space, building perspective, showing warmth when we are interviewing, listening.

Table 3. Description of Webinar 3, “Models of Evaluation Training for Evaluators for 2021 and Beyond”

Presentation / Presenter	Examples of Learnings
Evaluation Machines and Evaluators’ Resilience <i>Frans Leeuw</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation has become a standing operating procedure. • Evaluation machine is a situation where the regime wants evaluation even if it is completely unnecessary. • Evaluitis—a new disease spreading feverishly, where everything is being evaluated. • Performance paradox—in public arena, the more you invest in evaluations and systemic evaluations all the time, cannot guarantee that the policies and programs in the organization are the most effective ones. • Evaluator resilience: Resilience is not only a cognitive-intellectual thing; it is also an in-depth ethical-behavioral approach/style of evaluators—strength in face of organizational difficulties, stress, (soft) power plays, etc., to fight and bounce back, which helps the profession realize goals.
Evaluation is About the Evaluand <i>Keiko Kuji-Shikatani</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every individual program is quite complex. Individual-level information is needed where the work meets the people at the ground level. • Experiential learning is very helpful in training evaluators. • You’ve got to know where you are to get to where you want to be. • Start from the needs that the program is addressing. • Learning as you go: embed evaluative thinking.
Combating Racism and Anti-Colonialism <i>Eugene Richardson</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interested in how people are programmed. It takes a long time to program a racist person. • How do we cut through those things? How do we combat racism? How do we become anti-colonialist? These are the things that are important in any interpretative work we do—whether it is an evaluation of a program or an evaluation of why the Ebola outbreak was so big in the Congo in 2019. • How colonial and imperial legacies have led to a structured disposition that leads people to act in the ways they do. How do we get people to understand these structured dispositions? How do we get people to understand the colonial mechanisms that are still built into what we do?
Teaching Judgment, Discernment, Political Navigation, and Balancing Alternative Value Sets <i>Melvin Mark</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is benefit in adopting an historical lens that has us look at past evaluations and learn from past evaluators, on both the positive and negative side. Importance of evaluation history in who evaluators are. • In addition to simulation, we could think about modeling in our training of evaluators.
Evaluation Stories That Highlight the Essential Things <i>Trish Newport</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of simplicity: Focus evaluation stories on what is essential. • We often get caught up in the noise and lose sight of the essential things. How can evaluation stories focus on what matters?

Discussion

The motivation to organize the webinars to rethink evaluator competencies was the harsh and paralyzing reality of COVID. At that time, there was a need to balance diverse perspectives given the limited scientific evidence available to help navigate a genuinely unprecedented time. Consider Cayley's (2020) point that there needed to be greater effort to understand the perils of uncertainties and the fallibility of limited evidence:

What is best understood as a fallible and sometimes fraught quest for reliable evidence becomes instead a pompous oracle that speaks in a single mighty voice. Second, it cripples policy. Rather than admitting to the judgments they have made, politicians shelter behind the skirts of science. This allows them to appear valiant—they are fearlessly following science—while at the same time absolving them of responsibility for the choices they have actually made or failed to make. (para. 8)

Given the challenges of COVID and the need to rethink how evaluators could be useful in balancing very different perspectives on how best to act under limited evidence, the webinars also helped to surface focus on multiple types of heterogeneities, including diversity of ways of knowing, heterogeneity of community values, roles of evaluation in different policy spaces in both the North and the South, and evaluators' ability to respond when individuals "fall through the cracks" of multiple intersections of disadvantage. There were no ready answers, but there was a sense that the time had arrived to take these issues forward.

There was also a recognition that during COVID different sectors (e.g., community and public sectors) required specialized evaluator competencies, and there was often limited attention given to the "particularities" of working in either the public or the community sector. One specific implication of this is the importance of identifying the types of competencies required for evaluators working in these sectors to better navigate the challenges that public and community sector organizations faced during COVID.

There also was a recognition that navigating decision-making in the future would require not necessarily new competencies but enhanced focus on existing competencies, such as interpersonal skills. As stressed by Jean King in this issue, in light of evaluators' experience with COVID, there is a need to rethink how best we can ensure that evaluators have the interpersonal skills to navigate the

challenges that can emerge from unprecedented events.

There also was a focus on rethinking fundamental evaluation ideas such as evaluation criteria. While much of evaluation has focused on tried criteria like efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, relevance, and coherence, there was much discussion on a need to rethink evaluation criteria given global challenges such as global warming. Given the existential crisis that multiple places are experiencing due to climate change, the need to think heterogeneously about which evaluation criteria matter in different settings and for different interventions has perhaps never been greater.

There also was a sense that this is a time of great opportunity, given the realities of how evaluations can help contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that need to be achieved by 2030. This is a time where training evaluators to be epistemically fluent would be critically useful to development organizations as they seek to address the SDGs. Evaluations for the Sustainable Development Goals need evaluators (and others) who can think of transformation in new ways. The evaluations of the SDGs also require a move from merely reporting progress on targets to evaluation approaches that can promote transformation (UN, 2023). The focus is not only on meeting targets, but also on how evaluations can help with transformation and disruption in multiple settings. There is also a need for evaluations of SDG efforts to help with identifying the ecology of solutions needed. Consider the following needs from a recent UN report (UN, 2023):

With the SDGs so far off track and building on lessons learned since 2015, it is time to take SDG follow-up to the next level. It is essential that the attention shift from reporting national action to an international audience to strengthening national accountability for progress and transformation.... In 2015 the SDGs were agreed as an integrated and indivisible set of Goals and they cannot be achieved one at a time or in siloes. The 2019 and 2023 Global Sustainable Development Reports make the evidence-based case that transformation toward sustainable development will only be possible if actions address systems of Goals and Targets. Policy actions are needed to drive key transitions and to serve as multipliers that advance progress across the SDGs. National priorities and contexts will determine the precise mix of policies and interventions, but combining

actions and actors geared to leave no one behind with those that balance human well-being and the stewardship of nature can help build a holistic approach. (pp. 28–29)

Conclusion

The webinars stressed the need for fresh ideas and the importance of creating spaces for dialogues among different perspectives from the North and the South on evaluator competencies to surface. There is much dialogue already happening on rethinking evaluator competencies on multiple platforms in the South, including webinars led by APEA. What consistently surfaced was the need to rethink evaluator competencies in platforms where fresh voices, especially from Southern perspectives, were highlighted based on development realities in Southern settings. It is important that such webinars are not just episodic learning events but a catalyst for building platforms for dialogue. This issue of *JMDE* is a result of these webinars and is intended to continue the dialogue that started there.

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