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Just conducting evaluations won't make SDG follow-up and review frameworks effective — we must also cultivate evaluative thinking.

Evaluative thinking involves critical thinking skills and requires a questioning viewpoint that can be acquired and nurtured.

Evaluative thinking grows when it is intentional, has an enabling environment, is supported by leaders and sees development as a context-specific and complex challenge. It is inhibited by 'project thinking', narrow roles, expectations of 'solutions', and by political pressures to hide failures or provide successes.

Evaluative thinking is an essential component of adaptive management and is indispensable for all decision makers, organisations and communities working towards the SDGs.

Realising the SDGs by reflecting on the way(s) we reason, plan and act: the importance of evaluative thinking

Systematically evaluating policies, programmes and strategies is an essential feature of ongoing follow-up and review processes for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. But although it may be shocking to say, evaluation on its own is not enough. If follow-up and review frameworks and mechanisms are to address challenges, gaps and successes, they must be *grounded in evaluative thinking*. Evaluative thinking includes both a set of skills and a particular outlook or viewpoint. Building capacity in evaluative thinking is not the same as building capacity to do evaluations. This briefing defines evaluative thinking, describes what it requires to thrive and what stifles or inhibits it, and explains how it is intimately connected to adaptive management.

The need for evaluative thinking

The need for a more formal and technologically advanced approach to monitoring and evaluation emerged as a strong lesson from efforts to implement the Millennium Development Goals. This is why the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pays explicit attention to creating national follow-up and review processes, coordinated and guided by the United Nation's High-Level Political Forum. The importance of evaluation is also discussed in other briefings in this series.[1,2,3]

However, the UN's RIO +20 conference, held in 2012,[4] taught us two equally important lessons: that meeting development challenges requires greater awareness of how economic, social and environmental conditions inter-relate; and that it also requires greater capacity building for transdisciplinary problem solving and innovation.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are strongly interconnected. This requires us to consider how we track not just progress towards individual goals, but also the interrelations between them. The creative problem solving and innovation this demands certainly requires skills in using research and evaluation methods. Yet even more important is a capacity for reasoning that (a) is willing to suspend judgement, (b) will question assumptions and claims, (c) can explore multiple perspectives and (d) addresses problems by exploring many possible solutions (that is, it engages in 'divergent thinking'). Put simply, we need *evaluative thinking*.

Evaluative thinking defined

Evaluative thinking is clearly relevant throughout the processes needed to achieve the SDGs

Evaluative thinking is different from evaluation (Box 1). Evaluation is an act — it is somebody doing something to achieve a particular goal. Systematic and disciplined evaluation is what *evaluators* do. However, *all of us* — evaluators, policymakers, parliamentarians, implementers and the general public — must also think evaluatively.

Evaluative thinking requires the skills and dispositions of critical thinking. Critical thinkers are skilled in the art of questioning. They seek clarification, probe unstated assumptions, ask for good reasons and evidence, examine multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and search for the implications and likely consequences of claims.[5] Critical thinking involves specific cognitive skills of interpretation, analysis, inference making and explanation.[6] Particular dispositions are also important, including intellectual humility, courage, integrity and confidence in reason. A critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, open- and fair-minded, flexible, honest in facing personal biases, sensible and wise in making judgements, willing to reconsider claims, diligent in pursuing relevant information and persistent in seeking sufficiently precise answers.[7]

Critical thinking is especially crucial where claims are being made about the effectiveness of interventions, strategies, projects and policies. This is precisely the situation encountered when having to judge whether and how the SDGs are being accomplished. For all individuals who have responsibility for realising the SDGs — and that is every one of us — critical thinking is indispensable.

Box 1. *Evaluation* and *evaluative thinking* are different

Evaluation applies a methodology and a set of research tools to document what happened (process and outcome) as a result of a policy, programme or strategy. Evaluation judges these kinds of interventions in terms of agreed-upon criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and so on). The 2030 Agenda has been clear that country-led evaluations are an essential aspect of SDG follow-up and review.

Evaluative thinking is a way of viewing the world, an ongoing process of critical reflection on, and appraisal of, assumptions and claims, coupled with a commitment to continuous learning and a willingness and ability to modify views in light of reasoned arguments and evidence. For more definitions of evaluative thinking, explore the references given in the notes section.[15]

Evaluative thinking involves thinking about the way(s) we reason, plan and act. This is known technically as metacognition. It involves examining one's own motivations, biases and wishes, and learning from failures as well as successes. These practices are not simply ways of understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses. Rather, they increase a person's ability to transfer and adapt learning to new contexts and tasks. These are very important skills for successful problem solving in environments where change is constant and outcomes are often unpredictable.

Thinking about the ways we reason, plan and act is particularly important when working in partnerships among agencies, local cultures, governments and the private sector, where efforts to achieve sustainable development are characterised by complexity, interdependence, uncertainty and diversity of viewpoints. 'Thinking about your thinking' is also an important skill for planners confronted with marginalised populations' perspectives or with emerging areas of knowledge. Effective action in all of these circumstances requires openness to, as well as an ability to learn from, people's many different ways of living and ways of knowing.

Growing and developing evaluative thinking

Building the capacity for evaluative thinking is not the same as building evaluation capacity. Building national capacity to conduct evaluations is certainly important — and assistance is available. For example, the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) has been supporting the development of voluntary organisations for professional evaluators (VOPEs) and promoting training programmes for evaluators.[8]

However, the capacity for evaluative thinking arises from education and training in reasoning and critical thinking, and is not just for experts. It should be an ability cultivated in all citizens. Taking the following actions can support evaluative thinking.

Develop 'intentionality'. The very act of participating in an evaluation may help stakeholders cultivate their evaluative thinking. However, this will happen only if specific steps are taken to directly involve stakeholders in evaluative thinking exercises. In other words, there must be intentionality. A recent report[9] on evaluative thinking explores how intentionality involves 'naming' evaluative thinking. Evaluations need to create 'reflection spaces' within existing processes and develop tools that facilitate evaluative thinking. For such evaluative thinking

processes to be effective, they need to be included in strategy or project design, and budgeted for appropriately. This approach helps evaluative thinking become an integral part of project implementation, maximising its ability to guide strategic decision making.

Ensure an enabling environment. For evaluative thinking to flourish there must be an enabling environment, that is, an evaluative culture within an organisation (or even more generally, within all of society). Characteristics of such a culture in governments, agencies and institutions (including donors' institutions) include:[10]

- Cultivating a climate of openness to questioning and different perspectives
- Valuing challenge and genuine dialogue
- Supporting inquiry, reflection and learning
- Basing decisions deliberately on evidence and evaluating the relevance and quality of that evidence.

Show leadership. Senior management should support the development of evaluative thinking when they prepare job descriptions and performance plans. These should prioritise and reward evaluative thinking, invest in staff's evaluative thinking capacities, and create procedures that engage partner organisations and communities in evaluative thinking processes.

Not inhibiting evaluative thinking

Conversely, evaluative thinking can be inhibited and even prevented by other commonly encountered approaches within development.[11] To avoid this, policymakers, planners and implementers should:

Stop thinking in terms of projects. People designing and implementing development interventions often see themselves as in charge of point-in-time projects rather than as catalysts of ongoing and long-term change. Projects are seen largely as engineering challenges that can be controlled and managed. They come to be viewed as schemes to be applied and monitored via indicators and checklists, rather than as innovations to be questioned. The 2030 Agenda recognises this problem and encourages us to take a strategic, longer-term view on the synergies and trade-offs involved in efforts to accomplish the interlinked SDGs.[12]

Don't assume evaluative thinking is only for evaluators. Just as gender is often viewed as the gender specialist's responsibility and security is seen as the security officer's role, so we tend to fall into the trap of thinking the evaluation specialist has sole responsibility for evaluative thinking. But in reality, evaluative thinking is everyone's responsibility.

Stop expecting a single solution. Difficult problems in health care, education, social security, environmental management, and so forth are unlikely to be solved 'once and for all'. In fact, they are the kinds of problems that must be continually addressed. If decision makers are confidently expecting a 'solution', they feel little need to regularly probe and test interventions and to ask the powerful, catalytic questions needed to tackle problems flexibly as situations change.

Don't surrender to political pressures. If there is political pressure to avoid potentially embarrassing public scrutiny of 'failures', or conversely to demonstrate 'results', then evaluative thinking can be stifled. Agencies, organisations and institutions are thinking evaluatively when they explore the reasons why they made certain strategic decisions or undertook particular activities; when they question what worked well and what did not; and when they seek to continuously learn from their experiences so that they can adapt to changing circumstances.

Linking evaluative thinking and adaptive management

The traditional 'predict-and-act' approach to policymaking involves defining problems to be addressed as precisely as possible, identifying the best solution among possible alternatives, implementing that solution and evaluating its effects. Any kind of thinking related to evaluation typically occurs at the end of the process.

But the reality of addressing sustainable development challenges across the world's economic, social and environmental systems is that change is constant, uncertain and often unpredictable.[12] Hence static planning must, in many circumstances, give way to 'adaptive management': a systematic, iterative and dynamic process that aims to manage and reduce uncertainly by continually monitoring and re-evaluating, and then adjusting decision making so that it is flexible but remains robust.

The keys to tackling complex problems through adaptive management are experimentation, feedback and adjustment. Evaluative thinking is a necessary enabler of these processes and for this reason all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the SDGs could be 'evaluative thinkers', both professional evaluators and others involved with the SDGs. For example, decision makers need to use evaluative thinking to decide what to evaluate. Commissioners of

evaluation need to use evaluative thinking both to prepare for proposed evaluations and to guide procurement. Programme designers need to use evaluative thinking to develop logic models and other frameworks. Statisticians and monitoring practitioners can use evaluative thinking to probe more deeply into what the data that is being generated means — this may also lead to the identification of a need for specific evaluation exercises.

Evaluative thinkers are able to experiment with innovations and take risks. They are able to live with uncertainty and cope with the fact that, no matter how well-crafted their plans might be, those plans are likely to be altered as circumstances change.[13]

Evaluative thinking is clearly relevant throughout the planning, design, implementation and evaluation processes needed to achieve the SDGs. In fact, evaluative thinking is indispensable for navigating complex, 'wicked' problems that define the very nature of sustainable development. Yes, 'doing evaluations' is important. But even more important is an ability to ask and honestly answer questions such as: is my thinking clear? Am I being just and fair? Am I dealing with the inherent complexities? Am I sticking to the issue at hand? Do I need to consider another point of view? Do I have good reasons and evidence for what I am claiming?[14]

These hallmarks of evaluative thinking are important not only for evaluators and planners engaged in the SDGs' follow-up and review processes, but also for all decision makers, organisations and communities.

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Notes

[1] Schwandt, T *et al.* (2016) Evaluation: a crucial ingredient for SDG success. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/17357IIED / [2] Ofir, Z *et al.* (2016) Five considerations for national evaluation agendas informed by the SDGs. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/17374IIED / [3] Lucks, D *et al.* (2016) Counting critically: SDG 'follow-up and review' needs interlinked indicators, monitoring and evaluation. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/17363IIED / [4] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/rio20.html / [5] Paul, R and Elder, L (2006). The art of Socratic questioning. The Foundation for Critical Thinking, Tomales, CA. www.criticalthinking.org/TGS_files/SocraticQuestioning2006.pdf / [6] Facione, P (1990) Critical thinking: a statement of expert consensus for purposes of educational assessment and instruction. The California Academic Press, Millbrae, CA. http://assessment.aas.duke.edu/documents/Delphi_Report.pdf / [7] Paul, R and Elder, L (2003) A miniature guide to scientific thinking. The Foundation for Critical Thinking, Tomales, CA. www.criticalthinking.org/TGS_files/SAM-ScientificThinking.pdf / [8] See the VOPE Toolkit at http://vopetoolkit.ioce.net/en/page/about-toolkit / [9] Griñó, L *et al.* (eds) (2014) Embracing evaluative thinking for better outcomes: Four NGO case studies, 83. www.alnap.org/resource/20629 / [10] Andrews, M *et al.* (2015) Doing problem driven work. CID Working Paper No. 307. Center for International Development, Harvard University. http://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/files/bsc/files/doing_problem_driven_work_wp_307.pdf / [11] Van Brabant, K (4 July 2016) These questions are ours! Evaluative thinking beyond monitoring and evaluation. www.linkedin.com/pulse/questions-ours-evaluative-thinking-beyond-m-e-koenraad-van-brabant?articleId=7836520594942094874 / [12] See USAID, mSTAR, and IDS (2015) Learning to adapt: exploring knowledge, information and data for adaptive programmes and policies. Workshop Summary Report. https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/learningtoadapt_workshop_report_final_2015oct.pdf; and Barder, O (7 September 2012) Complexity, adaptation, and results. www.cgdev.org/blog/complexity-adaptation-and-results / [13] Preskill, H and Beer, T (2012) Evaluating social innovation. Centre for Evaluation Innovation, Washington, DC. www.fsg.org/publications/evaluating-social-innovation / [14] Elder, L (2004) Diversity: making sense of it through critical thinking. www.criticalthinking.org/pages/diversity-making-sense-of-it-through-critical-thinking/489 / [15] See the definitions of evaluative thinking in: Earl, L and Timperley, H (2015) Evaluative thinking for successful educational innovation. OECD Education Working Paper No. 122. OECD Publishing, Paris http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jrxtk1jtdwf-en; Buckley, J *et al.* (2015) Defining and teaching evaluative thinking: insights from research on critical thinking. *American Journal of Evaluation* 36(3), 375–388; Davidson, EJ *et al.* (2004) Evaluative thinking for grantees. In: Braverman, MT *et al.* (eds) *Foundations and Evaluation: Contexts and Practices for Effective Philanthropy.* Wiley, New York.

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EvalPartners is a global partnership that aims to influence stakeholders so evaluative evidence and reasoning and values of equity and effectiveness are incorporated in policy and planning.

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