Conclusion to the Thematic Segment: Transforming Evaluation Practice for "Business Unusual"

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More than ever before, the idea of returning to "business as usual" is being challenged. Over the last few years, we have witnessed unprecedented health and socio-economic impacts from climate change-induced catastrophes: extensive wildfires, floods, droughts, and disease transmission. There are new, emerging infectious diseases already present in certain regions of the world which have spread rapidly to a large proportion of the population. The various Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemics of recent years are one such example. But the most recent SARS COV-2 (referred hereafter by its more popular name of COVID-19) has been a pandemic that continues to have devastating impacts on the world's social, political, economic, education, and especially public health systems as we experience distinctly different COVID pandemics around the world.

While vaccination programs might temporarily restrain the transmission and spread of the virus, for many reasons—delivery, logistical, and economic issues—there is no harmonized plan. As we are witnessing, the vaccine program is being phased in at different times in different countries and inevitably remains a temporary solution. There is no global, coordinated health policy in place despite the fact that we were already living in a world where international and even intercontinental tourism had become the norm. If not for pleasure, travel for work as well as increasing labour mobility between countries and continents was also becoming commonplace. Other recent viruses, such as Ebola and SARS, previously showed how difficult it is to control movement in a world with unnatural borders. While we initially witnessed very positive results from the restrictive protection measures applied in countries with "closed natural borders," such as in New Zealand and Australia, this was, and still remains, a temporary solution. The COVID-19 pandemic is still out of control. Moreover, the fear of going "outside" remains high, as information about new mutations spreads. Constant "tweaking" will be needed to protect against the inevitable new mutations. Prolonged confinement will therefore not be a medium- to long-term solution. Secondary pandemics of increasing poverty and mental health disorders are already emerging, with little known as yet about how far they reach.

The response to the COVID-19 epidemic has been varied, approached in different ways, and essentially at a national level. The World Health Organization (WHO) has been constantly calling for global coordination of both the management of the virus and of the vaccination program.

 Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation / La Revue canadienne d'évaluation de programme
doi: 10.3138/cjpe.72730

We need to look beyond national responses. Awareness of our individual, social, and political responsibility in managing how to respond to the natural and societal challenges we are facing now and in the future is insufficient. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development already holds some of the answers for what collective actions are needed. First, the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the world's challenges today needs to be accentuated in the media and political discourse. Second, the promotion and support of policies aimed at achieving the objectives set out in the 2030 Agenda's SDGs need to be better prioritised and actioned. This is a given to many. But it is not happening at the accelerated pace that would ensure multi-dimensional COVID-19 pandemic management and recovery planning.

So what does this mean for the evaluation community, and where should it usefully position itself now? Each of the articles in this segment has provided much food for thought on why and how we need to be more "holistic" in our approach. Three specific themes that are relevant to all evaluators stand out.

In the first place, there is the question of values. We are reminded in the articles that *values* should be at the very heart of evaluative work. The United Nation's SDGs reflect the values that are needed to support a sustainable future for Earth. They are relevant to both developed and emerging economies, but how well are they being translated into agricultural, social, health, rural, and urban development policies in the various government policies around the world? Evaluators need to be more explicit about whose values are dominant in the policies they are evaluating and, particularly, what the ramifications are for the well-being of the environment and different levels of society. Equally, evaluators need to consider what type of values are important to the well-being of societies and a sustainable world in order to make evaluations more relevant and reliable for all stakeholders. For instance, it is reported that the United States spends $351 billion annually to maintain nuclear systems for defence. For the same amount, it is estimated there could be an annual supply of 300,000 intensive-care beds, 35,000 ventilators, 150,000 nurses, and 75,000 doctors (Garcia, 2021, p. 12).

Second, there is the issue of complexity and systems analysis. Systems thinking as a prerequisite for adopting systems concepts in evaluations can help make evident the interconnectivity of the different policy areas and the systems within (Van den Berg et al., 2019). It is a radically different perspective from a simplistic and linear reasoning approach in which micro-actions cause changes at macro levels. For more than two decades this has been discussed in the evaluation literature, but there are seemingly still too few examples of its application in practice being reported, though there are some signs of change (Barbrook-Johnson et al., 2021). Certainly, in part, this may well be due to a lack of evaluator expertise. But, as shown by Hejnowicz and Chaplowe in their paper, evaluators can draw on the ongoing innovations in digital technology and their experts to support systems analysis and transformation-focused evaluations (e.g., systems mapping). But expecting evaluators to have all the necessary up-to-date technological skills is probably unrealistic: Interdisciplinary teams

will become more the norm than the exception. Pooled expertise to include not only evaluators but also social scientists, policy analysts, digital technology experts, and other stakeholders can provide a broader and richer analysis, and in a timelier manner. Evaluators can make a valuable contribution since they are well versed in raising relevant questions, mapping interconnections, and mediating to consider the risks, benefits, and trade-offs (e.g., Patton, 2019; Picciotto, 2020; Schwandt, 2019). But then, of course, there is a lack of resources and/or willingness on the part of commissioners to make such investments and take "risks" (e.g., Cox & Barbrook-Johnson, 2020). At the same time, it is increasingly recognized in governments around the world that a simple input-output solution is just not realistic.

Third, and relevant to the previous point, although not explicit, the need for capacity building as a priority is implicit in the articles. This is so with regard to the practitioners and commissioners alike, be they in public policy, civil society, not-for-profit, or the private sector. As Ofir argues, those with power in the evaluation community need to shift their focus and do more to support evaluations that look beyond convention. For instance, in the field of public policy, there are now numerous policy labs and policy "innovative teams" around the world (Lee & Ma, 2019; Olejniczak et al., 2019), some of which are taking a systems approach for analyzing and experimenting with policy development. These initiatives provide valuable opportunities for evaluators to bring their skills to the fore. Better to integrate evaluative and systems thinking at the intervention, policy or systems design phase than at the more usual, later stage—that is for judging their implementation and effectiveness. As Thomas Schwandt (2019) indicated, the image of evaluation and its value have been undermined by its too frequent association with accountability—judging the results of initiatives that are up and running rather than being integrated into the design phase. Fortunately, the policy labs and other such initiatives are taking a collaborative and innovative approach for policy design, but it is unclear in the articles referenced whether radical, systems transformations to address today's complexity are being considered. By contrast, the United Kingdom's Centre for the Evaluation of Complexity Across the Nexus (CECAN, 2020) is an example of an interdisciplinary, academic, and government collaborative initiative that specifically includes the participation of evaluators in the development, testing, and promotion of innovative approaches and methods to deal with complexity in policy evaluation.

The authors are to be thanked for their thought-provoking contributions: They have also provided some very useful and practical suggestions for how evaluation can play its part in supporting transformation (e.g., Gallagher and Ofir's article, part 3). The choice is clear: It is increasingly recognized that there can be no return to using outdated and ineffective measures for addressing today's problems. The articles have stressed the worthwhile contribution that evaluation can make by applying its unique skill set to support a transformative socio-political end economic agenda.

doi: 10.3138/cjpe.72730

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