Working Group #1:
Evaluation for Transformation (E4T)

BRIEFING: INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKING GROUP MANIFESTO

Transformation, far from being the buzzword, it risks becoming, is an extremely important concept. It is defining the era in which we now live. The dire state of our planetary ecosystems; the changes wrought by completely unbalanced consumption patterns, the digital and knowledge economies and increasingly the fourth industrial revolution; and the ambition expressed in the 2030 Agenda with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other international agreements, as well as in continental agendas such as the African Union’s Agenda 2063 – all serve one critical purpose: to remind us of the urgency with which we have to move away from the notion of “business as usual”. Change has to be fast, and it has to be transformational.

This demands from us a robust focus on transformational change and transformational development from complex systems perspectives – and therefore the use and expansion of forefront work in complexity science and other relevant fields of work, applied in practice. It demands acknowledging that our shared future now requires cooperation and collective action across multiple boundaries – geographic, disciplinary, sectoral, institutional and ideological – especially among those who do not usually cooperate yet are influential in one another’s domain. Scientists, evaluation professionals, policymakers, policy implementers and business interests have to engage in concert with one another. We need the stimulation and innovation that diversity, focus and the smart concentration of intellectual, experiential, financial and in-kind resources bring.

We need to acknowledge that achieving development that serves our world in this era is extremely complex, and beyond the control of a powerful few.

Most importantly, we have to accept that development is now defined by the framework provided by the 2030 Agenda, agreed upon in 2015 by all governments around the world. Together, the SDGs serve as compass for transformational development towards the world we want. Cynicism about their ambition and shortcomings is unhelpful and can be destructive. Striving to achieve the SDGs is not the preserve of the United Nations as institution; it is the responsibility of each nation-state for the sake of its society, its ecosystems and our planet.

This is why the SDG Transformations Forum, established in 2017 after wide consultation, uses the 2030 Agenda to frame and shape its priorities and approach. We recognize that underlying the narrative of the SDGs is the critical notion of transformational systems change that has to help accelerate trajectories towards development success. Policies and strategies launched by nation-states, transnational groupings and global conventions have to be cognizant of this concept and its implications for practice. The time of isolated micro interventions that lead to little if any positive change in the long term is over. Time has run out. Real poverty reduction since the beginning of the millennium has come about through real transformation, even when achieved through incremental steps. Such knowledge and insights now have to be harnessed by all.

The Evaluation for Transformation Working Group of the Forum has at its core the ambition to help co-create and co-steward transformational systems change by focusing its strategy on answering four questions:

1. Understanding, advancing & demonstrating good practice. How can those of us working on the interface of evaluation, development/humanitarian action and transformation help accelerate the pace and scope of positive change from local to global level through a focus on holism & transformational (systems) change within an era of global development that is largely defined by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but not exclusively so?
(Given the 4th Industrial Revolution, doughnut economics/evonomics, fierce geopolitical competition for power & resources, global power shifts, climate change, context-specific national/regional priorities, and other global dynamics)?

2. Conceptualising ‘evaluative practice’ (new?) for this era. What is and can be the role of evaluation/evaluative practice in accelerating trajectories towards transformational (systems) change during this era?

3. Analysing and diagnosing the global evaluation system. How do the existing global evaluation system and evaluative practice relate to this role?

(That is, the current boundaries, relationships and points of power, and the ideologies, incentives, capacities and priorities driving action in different parts of the world – given the increasing vibrancy and profile of evaluative practice in many parts of the world, yet also the increasing diversity, fragmentation and concern about shortcomings such as lack of power and special interest capture.)

4. Shaping the future of evaluation for an era shaped by the 2030 Agenda and beyond. How can the evaluation system, or one or more of its components, best be harnessed or, if necessary, itself transformed to make the best possible contributions for this era, with a focus on the SDGs at both national and transnational level?

We believe in the power of action that harnesses energy and resources wherever available, and in a way that achieves more than would otherwise have been possible as individual effort. We therefore strive to draw together those who share our vision, around two objectives:

1. Use the (potentially) transformational power of evaluative practice to understand and help accelerate positive transformational change from local to global level, with a special focus at national level; and

2. Seek transformational change in and of the global evaluation system itself, so that its full potential is harnessed for this purpose.

Our work is based on a set of Guiding Principles, five underlying the Forum itself and ten unique to the Working Group. They shape whatever we do. They ensure that we maintain holistic and global perspectives while appreciating and working within diverse worldviews, values and experiences. They remind us that we have to work on the forefront, and on the crossroads of disciplines, sectors and fields of work, to find solutions fit for purpose - building on what is already available through sharing and co-creating while gaining strength from diversity. They keep us mindful of complexity, yet firmly rooted in real world practice, and seeing beyond convention while being pragmatic. They keep us focused on high quality, legitimate and valuable contributions that make a real difference in practice.

We have nine initial Interest Group (IG) Initiatives on the interface of evaluation, development and transformation. We established them with following logic: We have to understand the current state of affairs, the gaps in our knowledge and the questions that need to be answered (IG#1). For this purpose, we need the perspectives of scientists and evaluation specialists as well as those responsible for enabling action on the ground – influential practitioners, policymakers, civil society and private sector groupings working on this interface (IG#1 and #6). We need to both use and expand our current knowledge about theory and practice, and demonstrate success, dealing with what is inherently complex in ways that work in current contexts (IG#2 and #3). We need to communicate concepts in a way that informs, inspires and engages change agents and early adopters – those organizations and networks or coalitions of actors prepared to take risks in trying something new (IG#4 and #5). We need to help shape the field of evaluative practice so that it evolves faster, in line with need and the urgency we all feel (IG#5, #6 and #7). We need to demonstrate all of this in what we do as Working Group and Forum, including in how we mobilize energies and resources (IG#8 and #9).

The intensity and success of our efforts are determined by the level of commitment, influence and resources of the Working Group, not by its size. We therefore work with individuals and organizations who believe in our objectives and are keen to connect with new ideas and practices, yet are prepared to accept the uncertainty of an unfolding effort that have many unknowns on the road to success.

Do feel free to join us!

This briefing accompanies the Manifesto of the E4T Working Group of the Forum