

# Evaluation for the Anthropocene: Introduction

**Andy Rowe**

Fellows' Strand plenary

Evaluation for the Anthropocene: Shaping a sustainability-ready  
evaluation field

2018 Canadian Evaluation Society Conference

Sustainability is a critical imperative requiring all aspects of human behaviour to adapt to reduce the harm we cause to the natural system that sustains us and avoid extinction. There is no question that this adaptation will increasingly occupy all major agendas and bring major changes to all aspects of human life. A relevant evaluation function must be able to address sustainability as a senior cross-cutting issue. Yet the evaluation field has shown little or no interest in sustainability, nor does it have the capacity to evaluate coupled human and natural systems that are at the core of achieving sustainability. Evaluation could provide important contributions to identifying and scaling effective remediation and mitigation approaches.

The evaluation field is starting to acknowledge the importance of sustainability and the limited current contribution of evaluation

to sustainability knowledge and practice; for example, the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) Sustainability Working Group (SWG) struck in 2018 to assess and advise on how a sustainability-ready evaluation function can be developed and how CES can contribute and support this including through modifying the CES competencies, promoting development of needed educational and professional development resources, encouraging the theoretical and practice adaptation of evaluation and so on. The stocktaking effort undertaken by the SWG is confirming that sustainability concerns and capacity are missing in action in the evaluation field. The Blue Marble effort spearheaded by Michael Patton (forthcoming) is another important and indicative direction, as are the research and advocacy efforts of individuals. And there are islands such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) and a few others where both human and natural systems are addressed in evaluations. And encouragingly the CES has sustainability as one of three cross-cutting elements in the new strategic plan along with truth and reconciliation and member experience. However these promising efforts are still rare and there are limited indications of the kinds of shifts which would suggest that the field is starting to address sustainability and is even considering sustainability as central to the undertaking.

Those who are attempting to promote this shift are making strategic decisions about how best to stimulate the kinds of actions which would contribute to evaluation saving itself from becoming irrelevant to the major problem and policy issue facing the world, and therefore becoming itself irrelevant. At least four sometimes overlapping strategies can be identified: a) “we can do it and it does not hurt” approach demonstrating that existing methods from several fields can be applied through mixed-methods evaluations to achieve integration of sustainability issues into the evaluation function, as exemplified by Juha Uitto and the GEF IEO through their evaluations of GEF and contributions

to the evaluation literature; b) a second strategy could be described as “it is urgent and this is how we should do it” by directly transforming evaluation through articulation of transformational trans-disciplinary approaches with conceptual development and demonstrations (Blue Marble) and highlighting the urgency of sustainability issues (Patton, forthcoming) and of individual evaluation intellectuals (Enkelejda , Butzbach, & Brousselle, 2019) and others; c) a third approach is the “business as usual, we will get there, all will be good” employed by proponents of the Sustainability Development Goals (SDG); and d) a fourth strategy represented in these papers is that “when evaluation sees the light these are some of the key capacities that will be needed.” With the possible exception of the *business as usual* SDG strategy, the strategies are not exclusive, to wit the short articles included here highlight capacities which will be useful to all strategies.

To date there has not been an effort to articulate the strategic options or facilitate dialogue among proponents. Being evaluators, we recognise that we should develop theories and mechanisms of change likely revealing synergies and hopefully leading to a consensus strategy. But being evaluators, we typically do not turn our practice on ourselves, at best the theories and mechanisms of change for promotion of sustainability-ready evaluation are implicit, perhaps associated with the uncritical logics instilled through employment and training, often lacking evidence or a plausible logic.

We employ the Brundtland Commission’s (1987) concept of sustainability that each generation should meet its needs without compromising the ability of future generations, with three coupled pillars; environment, economic, and social. Yet since the 1970s we have required more than one planet to support the human population (Global Footprint Network, 2016); and we do not have the actual materials on earth (e.g., gravel, water, food) to support more than a fraction of the forecasted urbanisation of the planet to 2050

(Swilling, 2016). Our view is that evaluators and evaluation will be caught up in rapidly accelerating global efforts to adapt and mitigate climate effects and towards more sustainable practices. It is essential that we are ready with a sufficiently sustainability-ready evaluation function to find our feet and be useful.

For the articles in this section rapid growth in the sciences of sustainability and climate change and increasing politicisation of those involved, as well as rapidly growing awareness globally, will be the mechanism of change towards a sustainability-ready evaluation field. Sustainability will inevitably come to evaluation (the trend is already observable) and evaluation will respond (or not). There is a fork in this road, one similar to the SDG approaches leading to replicating the siloed approach and holding to unhelpful constructs of the origins of evaluation (Rowe 2018); the other leading to transformational change in evaluation by establishing a silo-busting theory and practice of evaluation recognising that coupled systems<sup>1</sup> are ubiquitous and so systematically cross-cut all that we currently evaluate. So the strategy is to:

- a. recognise that the mechanism of change is growing in force and effect, that the choice between the two forks is a false choice, the business as usual fork will not do the job
- b. anticipate some basic requirements of an emerging transformed evaluation and prepare for competencies, approaches, and outlooks which will be required
- c. do this in a use-seeking fashion, joint knowledge development with early adopters within evaluation, evaluation consumers and practice leaders from fields where these competencies, approaches, and outlooks are already functioning.

---

1 Note *complex* is a characteristic of coupled, coupled not necessary for complex—and sustainability deals with coupled and ensuring characteristics including complex but also related dynamic, thresholds, history, scales, etc.

This use-seeking approach is important to the strategy. A sustainability-ready evaluation will not be achieved through peer-reviewed publishing and research, but by working jointly with users and decision makers and practice leaders from other fields.

Some have identified accountability and social science as the rootstock of the tree of evaluation (Alkin & Christie, 2004). If so, the soil that the rootstock draws from is a terroir of dominion, a belief that humans have ownership and rights over all else, that value is to be found in human activity, and that natural systems are infinite and free. This is the worldview that underpins the sustainability crisis we face today. Other worldviews, in particular indigenous worldviews, are strongly sustainability-ready and represent a fruitful pathway for evaluation. Achieving sustainability-ready evaluation requires evaluation to change its worldview from one based on dominion to one based on equality across and within systems (Rowe, 2019).

This panel brings together experts from a few key knowledges required for sustainability-ready evaluation; biophysical sciences and resource extraction, conflict resolution as the science and art of reaching agreement across different worldviews, knowledges and opposing interests, and evaluation practices that are leading the way towards a sustainability-ready evaluation function.

The panel took a solution focus in addressing the challenging adaptive elements.

1. Evaluators and evaluators need competency in multi-science applied knowledge development. What are the challenges bringing social and biophysical sciences together, how can this occur in ways that promote use? (Sean Curry, Juha Uitto)
2. What capacities do evaluators need for settings where different and sometimes adversarial knowledges and sciences collaborate to reach implementable and durable decisions? (Patrick Field)

3. Evaluators and evaluation need to understand what this will mean for contemporary evaluation knowledge and practice. How are evaluation thought leaders and the field in general likely to react, what will be the sources of resistance and support? What does sustainability-ready mean for contemporary evaluation, how are evaluators likely to react, where is the leadership and authority (Jane Davidson)

### **Background on authors**

Juha Uitto introduces the challenge. Sean Curry will provide a perspective of the types of knowledge required and the challenges brought to these by multiple empowered interests. Patrick Field discusses how sustainability-ready evaluation requires stakeholders and experts in different sciences to work collaboratively in complex coupled human and natural system settings often involving indigenous stakeholders. Discussant Jane Davidson asks, How will the evaluation community respond? Why are we not doing this already, how does it fit with contemporary thought, practice, and capacity in evaluation? What are the likely sources of support for and resistance to sustainability-ready evaluation?

### **References**

- Alkin, M.C. & Christie, C.A. (2004). An evaluation theory tree. In M.C. Alkin (Ed.), *Evaluation roots: Tracing theorists views and influences* (pp. 12–65). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brundtland Commission (1987). *Our common future*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Enkelejda, S.-R., Butzbach, C., & Brousselle, A. (2019). Planetary health: Countering commercial and corporate power. *The Lancet*, 30241-9.

- Global Footprint Network (2016). *Footprint Basics*. November 22.  
Available at [www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/footprint\\_basics\\_overview/](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/footprint_basics_overview/)
- Patton, M. Q. (forthcoming). *New Directions in Evaluation*.
- Rowe, A. (forthcoming). Sustainability-Ready Evaluation: A call to action.  
*New Directions in Evaluation*.
- Rowe, A. (2019). Introduction to Rapid Impact Assessment (IRE).  
*Evaluation*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356389019870213>
- Swilling, M. (2016, July 12). *The curse of urban sprawl: how cities grow, and why this has to change*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jul/12/urban-sprawl-how-cities-grow-change-sustainability-urban-age>
- Uitto, J. I. (2016). Evaluating the environment as a global public good.  
*Evaluation*, 108–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356389015623135>

### ***The author***

Andy Rowe, from ARCEconomics, was panel chair and organiser

**Email:** [andy@arceconomics.com](mailto:andy@arceconomics.com)