

## EvalSDGs INSIGHT # 14: Mainstreaming Environmental Sustainability in Evaluation

### PURPOSE

The urgent environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century starkly reveal the interdependencies that underpin the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the devastating consequences for life on this planet due to human-made environmental harm. In this EVALSDGs Insight #14, we look at the urgent need to mainstream environmental sustainability in the evaluation of all interventions, even when environmental sustainability is not a stated goal. We show that for the most part this is not happening, and we provide some conceptual considerations and practical examples for addressing this so that evaluations, regardless of the evaluand, critically include environmental impact.

### THE ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCY

The rate of human-caused (*anthropogenic*) environmental damage is increasing across the planet faster than previously thought, underscored by the [sixth assessment report \(2022\)](#) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the body of the world’s leading climate scientists. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called the IPCC report “code red for humanity.”<sup>1</sup>

Climate change is not the only critical environmental problem the world currently faces. The warning signs are all around us, from rising sea levels and extreme weather and heat events to deforestation, desertification, and pollution of oceans and the atmosphere. In the World Economic Forum’s [2021 Global Risks Report](#), four of the top five risks identified by likelihood are environmental (extreme weather, climate inaction, human environmental damage, and biodiversity loss); the remaining risk, infectious diseases, is integrally linked to environmental degradation. With the global population estimated to increase by 2 billion to 10 billion people by 2050,<sup>2</sup> and the need to provide an adequate standard of living to the 2 billion people still living in abject poverty, the demand on natural resources, energy use, and increased waste will

continue to degrade and stress the environment and the humanity it sustains.

This destruction of the environment is integrally interlinked with social challenges mirrored in the SDGs. To a large degree, it underlies and exacerbates many of the social problems we confront today because environmental degradation stresses the very ecosystems that support life on the planet, affecting the habitability and natural resource base needed to sustain humanity. In other words, environmental problems contribute to social problems, with the poor, marginalized, and most vulnerable bearing a disproportionate share of the burden (see, for example, [OECD](#), [Yale Environment 360](#), [Healthline](#), [PCI](#)).



The environmental crisis is a powerful reminder of the interrelationships of today’s problems, as is strikingly evident in the *zoonotic* origins of COVID-19. This means that COVID-19 is transmitted from non-human animals to humans, which calls attention to how human encroachment on natural habitats is increasing the occurrence of such health threats. A related environmental driver for COVID-19’s health impact is air pollution because people whose respiratory systems have been affected by air pollution have an increased likelihood that

<sup>1</sup> <https://unric.org/en/guterres-the-ipcc-report-is-a-code-red-for-humanity/>

<sup>2</sup> [World Population Prospects 2019 Highlights \(un.org\)](#)

they will contract COVID-19 and that it will be severe (Imperial College London, 2021).

## **EVALUATION'S GAP: MAINSTREAMING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The accelerating global environmental emergency has intensified both awareness and commitment to addressing it in the international community. The year 2015 was a watershed, when the UN [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and its 17 interconnected SDGs, the [Paris Agreement on Climate Change](#), and the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) were launched. The message of these three landmark global initiatives, recently affirmed by the 2021 [Glasgow Climate Pact](#) reached at the COP26 and the [Dasgupta Review](#) on the economics of biodiversity, stresses the crucial links among the environment, development, and humanitarian action that are ultimately necessary to protect the planet for all of humanity.

In short, we have a long way to go in a short amount of time if commitment is going to amount to action on our urgent environmental and resultant social predicaments. As environmental issues are increasingly being mainstreamed across a range of public, civic, and private organizations and initiatives, the question arises: *What about the practice of evaluation? As a profession in the business of assessment and helping to solve problems, to what degree has or can evaluation mainstream environmental sustainability?*

Evaluation can play an important role in the essential shift to a more environmentally responsible and risk-informed approach to policy, strategy, and programming. This is what is meant by the principle of [Skin in the Game](#): acknowledging and acting on evaluation's stake in the survival of humanity and the planet.

Nonetheless, there is a gap in the mainstreaming of environmental sustainability in the field and practice of evaluation. While agencies and organizations with clear environmental mandates already include environmental impacts in their evaluations, this is not true for the evaluation of interventions where environmental sustainability is not a stated goal. Instead, the norm is to sideline rather than mainstream environmental impacts in evaluation.

This gap was underscored recently in two separate stocktaking exercises that included assessments of the degree to which environmental considerations were incorporated into evaluations. The first is the [Stock-Taking Exercise on Policies and Guidance of UN Agencies in Support of Evaluation of Social and Environmental Considerations](#), conducted by the United Nations

Evaluation Group in two phases in 2020 and 2021, which found that the "great majority" of evaluation and policies and guidance documents did not address environmental considerations. The second was conducted by the Canadian Evaluation Society and published in the 2021 [Report on Stocktaking for Sustainability-Ready Evaluation](#), which concluded that sustainability and consideration of the natural system were "largely missing" from federal evaluation.

## **FILLING THE MAINSTREAMING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY GAP IN EVALUATION**

The mainstreaming of intended and unintended environmental consequences in evaluations will require action on multiple fronts, including: 1) the recognition, understanding, and capacity of evaluators to pursue it, 2) the demand by those who commission evaluations to include it, and 3) an enabling environment supporting it, encompassing norms, standards, policy, procedures, guidance, incentives, capacity development, etc.

One critical factor for mainstreaming environmental sustainability in evaluation is the growing attention to and uptake of complexity and systems thinking in evaluation. Complex systems analysis situates the interventions evaluated in a broader context that encompasses the interrelationships and interdependencies among human and natural systems. Complex systems analysis can take many forms, from developmental evaluation and realist evaluation to other evaluation approaches that draw upon traditional, non-Western, and indigenous worldviews that stress the innate connectedness and equality between the human and non-human worlds (e.g., [Evaluating Indigenous](#)). They can be summative as well as formative or real-time.

We need to evaluate outside the box and expand the evaluation beyond the intended results of discrete projects and programs. Interventions in sustainable development have largely been dominated by single, clearly defined projects and programs provided by single agencies and funded by single donors. These interventions are typically treated as closed systems, boxes, with linear theories of change and predetermined results that overlook the broader context and complex interactions and interdependencies in which they are unpacked. Narrow piecemeal approaches do not connect the dots required for more environmentally (and socially) responsible development, and they risk overlooking important spillovers and side effects, whether these are harmful or synergistic.

As with the SDGs themselves, discrete interventions like projects and programs should be designed, monitored, and evaluated with attention to their relationship with and

impact on the larger ecosystem in which they are delivered. This includes all three pillars of sustainable development – economic, social, and environmental – and other interventions contributing to these pillars. Such an expanded concept of “coherence” is based on the premise that if interventions are to be sustainable, they need to be compatible with other efforts for sustainable development.

### EXAMPLE INITIATIVES FOR MAINSTREAMING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN EVALUATION

Established in 2019, the [UNEG Working Group on Integrating Environmental and Social Impact into Evaluations](#), noted above, is an important ongoing effort to mainstream environmental sustainability in evaluations given that UNEG encompasses more than 50 separate UN affiliated evaluation units. Another example is [Blue Marble Evaluation](#) (BME), a global initiative named after Michael Quinn Patton’s seminal book (2020). BME is focused on training the next generation of evaluators to think, act, and evaluate globally to affect transformational change to confront the challenges mirrored in the SDGs. The BME perspective looks beyond discrete interventions and sector areas to support evaluative thinking and methods that connect human and natural systems for sustainable systems transformations.

[Footprint Evaluation](#) is another recent example, grounded in the premise that all evaluations should include consideration of environmental sustainability, even when this is not a stated goal of the intervention. **Box 1** showcases some specific examples that Footprint Evaluation identifies for how evaluators can incorporate environmental sustainability in their work. Both Blue Marble Evaluation and Footprint Evaluation have a growing community of practice with a variety of online resources, newsletters, discussion groups, and more.

### “SUSTAINABILITY” REVISITED

The concept of “sustainability” and how it is understood and used in evaluation, as an evaluation criterion or in evaluation questions, is a topic worthy of closer examination, as it can critically affect the degree to which environmental impacts are incorporated into evaluation. Attention to the understanding and use of sustainability in evaluation was recently rekindled when the [OECD-DAC evaluation criteria](#), first introduced in 1991, were revised in 2019. The subsequent debate has centered on the degree to which the revision of the sustainability criterion, “measuring whether the benefits of an activity are likely to continue after donor funding has been withdrawn,”

stresses the assessment of the continuity of intended results while excluding unintended consequences on natural and human systems. The focus is on continuity of the program benefits (i.e., durability), rather than on environmental sustainability.

### BOX 1: Footprint Evaluation – Putting Environmental Considerations on the Evaluation Agenda

One of the challenges and leverage points Footprint Evaluation identifies for mainstreaming environmental sustainability in evaluation is to incorporate it into the evaluation’s terms of reference. It identifies four key possibilities, which are summarized here with links to supporting resources:

1. [Drawing on the OECD-DAC Criteria](#), particularly relevance, coherence, impact, and sustainability.
2. [Developing Key Evaluation Questions](#) that include consideration of environmental issues.
3. [Referencing existing environmental commitments](#) where relevant; these may be international agreements or national or local policies or strategies.
4. [Making the argument](#) by stressing the urgency of environmental sustainability and linking it to issues of equity, human rights, and social justice.

For instance, the evaluation of sustainability of intended benefits of an agricultural export program that includes chemical fertilizers and pesticides may focus too narrowly on planned results and relevant key performance indicators such as productivity (e.g., crop yield) and profitability (e.g., farm income), excluding very real and damaging downstream costs to the local ecosystem due to resultant topsoil erosion, groundwater pollution, and biodiversity loss.

In response to this concern, some, such as Michael Quinn Patton, have advocated moving away from the DAC evaluation criteria, proposing instead an alternative set of evaluation criteria for evaluating transformation, including a criterion for “[adaptive sustainability](#)” (p. 29), which focuses on ecosystem resilience and adaptability at the nexus of humans and the environment. Others, like [Footprint Evaluation](#) (see Box 1), recommend using the DAC evaluation criteria, but through a natural systems lens, considering resilience and impacts relative to climate change and other sources of environmental degradation.<sup>3</sup>

### INSTITUTIONALIZING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN EVALUATION – LESSONS FROM IFAD<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See the series of posts from Zenda Ofir on the DAC evaluation criteria for more discussion on this topic, e.g., [The DAC criteria, Part 11. From criteria to design principles](#).

<sup>4</sup> Text adapted and diagram taken from Suppiramaniam, Nanthikesan. 2021. [“Averting a ‘train wreck’ – Taking stock of environmental consequences of development interventions”](#)

We will conclude our discussion with an example of an organization that has successfully institutionalized environmental sustainability into its evaluations. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a UN agency mandated to improve food security and alleviate poverty in the rural agricultural sector, set out over a decade ago to mainstream environmental and social considerations into its evaluations. Two key factors supported IFAD in this effort. First, *motivation* was critical, supported by visionary leadership and financial support from donors who provided grants to test how to best mainstream environmental considerations into projects and their evaluation.

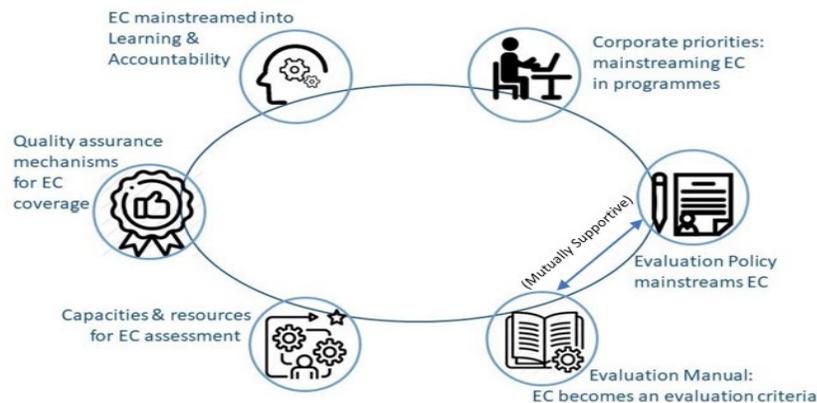
As visualized in **Diagram 1**, the second key factor in IFAD's success was the *systemic institutionalization of environmental considerations* throughout IFAD, based on five<sup>5</sup> interlocking elements:

1. **Mainstream environmental considerations as an organizational priority**, not just in evaluation but across project planning and implementation. This was realized

by incorporating environmental priorities in IFAD's strategies since 2007.

2. **Embody environmental considerations as a requirement supported with evaluation policy and guidance.** Rather than an ad hoc choice of individual evaluation managers, the evaluation of environmental consequences should be systemic, embodied in the Evaluation Policy and Evaluation Manual.
3. **Allocate capacity and resources to evaluations to assess environmental effects.** This includes the ability to fund, commission, and manage evaluations that incorporate environmental considerations.
4. **Use evaluation quality assurance processes** that include the coverage of environmental consequences, such as internal peer reviews.
5. **Link related evaluation findings to organizational learning and accountability.** This is achieved through including environmental consequences in annual meta-evaluations of all IFAD projects and tracking management response to evaluation recommendations

**DIAGRAM 1: Key Factors for Institutionalizing the Evaluation of Environmental Impact**



Source: Nanthikesan Suppiramaniam, 2021. Note: EC = environmental considerations.

**Additional Resources:** In addition to those resources already identified, we recommend Andy Rowe's 2019 article in the *New Directions for Evaluation*, "[Sustainability-Ready Evaluation: A Call to Action](#)," which provides an initial checklist and references to useful resources. We also recommend the two collections of essays that bring together contributions from evaluation thinkers and practitioners reflecting on their experiences of working with major international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and academia: [Evaluating Environment in International Development](#) and [Transformational Change for People and the Planet](#). These resources are open access and freely available online.

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### Did you know?

EVALS DGs is a global network formed to add value and learning to SDGs, made up of people with a shared interest in evaluation and sustainable development. EVALSDGs Guidance Group (GG) is an EVALSDGs sub-group focusing on strengthening capacity development for evaluation and the SDGs. The EVALSDGs 'Insights' are short, light and easy to digest notes presenting ideas and new information, and stimulate thinking to strengthen evaluation capacity.