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EVALUATION IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: A Call to Action

More a social term than an accurate geological term, e.g. Holocene, Pleistocene, the term Anthropocene was popularised by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen in 2000¹.

Coined and joined from anthropo, for “man,” and cene, for “new”, the term seeks to denote the epoch that we are in, and in which human-kind is causing mass extinctions of plant and animal species, polluting the oceans and altering the atmosphere, among other lasting impacts.

Some well-known news outlets have interpreted and headlined the recent (October 2018) special report² of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) with titles such as: “Major Climate Report Describes a Strong Risk of Crisis as Early as 2040”³ and “We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN”⁴.

While it would be tempting to rally around the latter headline, as it dovetails nicely with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development timeline, we have a responsibility as scientists to be skeptical of general statements, particularly when these are presented in attention-seeking fashion to short attention spans.

Indeed, a closer examination of the IPCC report reveals, as can be expected of reality and its complex phenomena, a far more nuanced and differentiated landscape of perspectives, interpretations of data as well the report’s positioning relative to international policy contexts and global political dynamics.

So, while the report does highlight real and significant risks to living species should we continue “business as usual”, it constitutes a call to action, for both individuals and governments.

¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-are-we-in-it-164801414/>

² An IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>

³ The New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/climate/ipcc-climate-report-2040.html>

⁴ The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report>

Debra Roberts, Co-Chair IPCC Working Group II:

“The report talks about four transitions the world has to go through in terms of energy, land, cities, and industry. And that’s a really empowering message because it means that each one of us as individuals can make choices about the energy we use to move through our lives, about dietary choices that impact on land use. It tells us that each of us can change the way we interact with the world’s cities, through the transport we choose to go to work and to play, It also talks to us that we have power as consumers, in terms of directing where industry goes, and goods are manufactured. So overall, a real call to action.”

Jim Skea, IPCC Working Group III:

“The key message is that we can keep global warming below 1.5 degrees °C. It is possible within the laws of physics and chemistry. But it will require huge transitions in all sorts of systems, energy, land, transportation, but what the report has done is to send out a clear message to the governments that it is physically possible, it is now up to them to decide whether they want to take up the challenge.”

And what has this got to do with us, as individual evaluators, and as professional evaluation communities of practice?

Well, just as our colleagues in the field of economics, who have begun to grapple with and debate the adequacy of their established theories, models, assumptions, tools and practices, i.e. economic orthodoxy, and to develop innovative approaches and techniques, so should we.

For professional evaluation as we know it and practice it today, has also had its “epochs”, albeit of miniscule timeframes in geological terms, however significant given its rapid development and potential for affecting positive change.

Although evaluation in its various manifestations has been practiced since time immemorial, the first professional evaluation societies came into being in the late 1970s in Canada and in the USA.

The **first** “epoch”, the “**Northamericanscene**” in the 1980s through to the mid 1990s, saw the rapid development and expansion of programme evaluation in the English-speaking world, anchored mostly in a utilitarian, New Public Management-inspired, conception of evaluation as a tool for accountability for results.

The **second** “epoch”, the “**Westerneuropeanscene**” appeared in the mid-nineties with the progressive development of professional evaluation associations in Europe and especially the establishment of a distinct professional evaluation function across the European Commission.

Although still very much in the same orientation as the preceding “epoch”, perspectives on democratic evaluation, empowerment evaluation as well as the role and place of evaluation in democracy, and as a political endeavour, among other ideas and ideals, started to come to the forefront.

The third “epoch”, the “**Globalscene**”, started to blossom in the early 2000s and continues to this day. Evaluation has become truly a global practice, with a particularly significant presence

in the fields of development, human rights, humanitarian interventions, climate change, etc. Also, there is a notable emphasis on the value of learning from evaluation.

What clearer indication of the global nature of evaluation's evolution than its intertwining with the SDGs?

And yet, the way in which we evaluators, and "mainstream" evaluation generally, continue to ply our craft, shows that, at best, we are well aware of the inadequacy of our usual approaches and methodologies but have not yet begun to make the fundamental paradigm shift that is required; or, at worst, that we not fully conscious of what we are doing and so contributing more to the status quo than to needed change, i.e. we are part of the problem rather than of the solution.

We have approached the SDGs with much the same mindset and tools that have prevailed over the last three "epochs", failing to recognise that the SDGs are a political statement, the expression of a remarkable global political consensus, rather than a set of results to achieve and indicators to measure and report on.

Our choice of approaches and methodologies reflect fundamental value choices and associated perspectives. Professionalism requires that these be understood, clear, explicit and their implications accepted as a responsibility. We should at the very least do no harm.

Which brings me to the key message I wish to share with you today. And it is that, as evaluators and as evaluation communities, if we want to contribute meaningfully to sustainability of life on this planet we must operate a fundamental shift in our professional mindset and practices.

And that shift requires us to rethink, reframe, revalue, relearn, retool and engage.

Rethink our ways of conducting evaluation, among other things moving from accountability to learning to action.

Reframe our ways of apprehending realities, among other things moving from programmatic to organisational to systems to global lens.

Revalue our inter-relationships and inter-dependencies with natural systems, among other things moving beyond human systems to encompass natural systems and the global system.

Relearn how to evaluate from different perspectives and sets of values.

Retool by adapting our mental models and technicalities.

Engage with uncertainty.

Undertaking this shift is both a personal professional responsibility as well as a responsibility for our many and diverse communities of practice globally.

To quote Michael Quinn Patton⁵ on Blue Marble Evaluators:

“The Blue Marble perspective means thinking globally, holistically, and systemically; in essence, thinking of the world and its peoples as the evaluand. This means thinking beyond a world of national-states. Evaluation as a field has developed effective and useful approaches and tools for monitoring and evaluating traditional projects, programs, national policies and plans, and international agency sector initiatives. But global problems require global solutions and global systems evaluation.”

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⁵ <http://www.utilization-focusedevaluation.org/blue-marble-evaluators/>