Transformation-focused evaluation

An introduction to evaluation and learning that supports system change towards regenerative futures



FixOurFood

ecocentric futures
TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH & ACTION

Transformations Community

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PREFACE FROM THE LEAD AUTHORS

Evaluation often carries a reputation as a dry, tiresome technical exercise, associated with compliance and punishment. But if this guide is successful, you will come away with a very different appreciation of evaluation. The guide explains how vital evaluation is not just for the functioning of our societies, but for catalysing urgently needed societal transformations towards regenerative futures. This in turn requires us to transform many deeply ingrained understandings and practices of evaluation that are constraining its potential.

Our guide grew out of the FixOurFood research programme, which aims to understand how to support transformation towards a regenerative food system in Yorkshire, a large region of north-east England. Much of our thinking has been developed in this context, and in the UK and Europe more widely. We share this guide with the hope that it will also be relevant in other situations.

Importantly, this guide has been largely developed by people from Western contexts and ancestry, with a system-change orientation in mind. We recognise that patriarchal and colonial histories and cultures have granted us unearned privilege to create and share this guide, and contributed to the suppression and dismantling of other cultures that operate from ecocentric and regenerative foundations embedded in their ongoing evaluation practices – and from which much can, and should, be learned. Much of this learning, however, has been appropriated and reinterpreted by Western academics without due attribution. This guide could therefore easily be seen as reinforcing such concerns, and the racial and gendered issues that are deeply entwined with regenerative practice.

So we offer this guide, in all humility, as a step in our own lifelong journeys of learning how to decolonise our own practice, reconfigure the Enlightenment worldviews of separation that most of us have been steeped in, and cultivate more regenerative ways of living and being in the world. We hope it can at least be a stage in the process of elevating marginalised perspectives of regenerative cultures, following the lead of many others including: the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the IPBES Values Assessment[1] and Transformative Change Assessment[2]; the work of EvalIndigenous, including the Wolastoq Declaration on Indigenous Evaluation; and the Protocols for Non-Indigenous People Working with Indigenous Knowledge developed by Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab and colleagues.



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GLOSSARY

Language, and the precision of language, plays a vital role in evaluation. The nuances of wording in a principle, criterion, law, declaration or national constitution can significantly influence how they are interpreted and implemented. Consider how fossil fuel industry representatives have lobbied to water down the language in COP agreements, for example. The meaning of language can be highly contextual, and difficult or even impossible to translate between contexts. Language is a key component of the positionality and subjectivity that we all bring into evaluation.

Below is a glossary of key terms and definitions related to transformation-focused evaluation that are used in this guide. Note that many definitions are debated and challenged; those presented here are our personal interpretations, which are continually changing as we learn. We have drawn particularly on the perspectives of Michael Scriven and Thomas Schwandt that are foundational in Western evaluation practice. Look out for italicised keywords in the main text that are hyperlinked back to this glossary.

We have deliberately not included a definition of Indigenous peoples and support Indigenous rights to self-identification and self-determination.

Criteria – dimensions against which an *evaluand* can be evaluated. Criteria might include *principles, values,* measures, guidelines, rules or other defining qualities.

Evaluand – the thing being evaluated.

Evaluation – the process of determining the value of something – including its merit, worth and significance. While Michael Scriven's definitions[3,4] have been highly influential in evaluation over past decades, they have been frequently extended and challenged from transformation-focused, Indigenous, post-normal and complexity-aware perspectives. We do not intend the definition above to replace or supercede these other perspectives, but rather to explain how our thinking underlying this guide has been shaped.

Some would restrict the term evaluation to formal, structured, systematic evaluation practice carried out in a professional context. But in this guide we treat evaluation as more of a spectrum that also includes the more innate, intuitive, informal evaluation that every one of us continuously applies.

Evaluation actor – a member of the broader suite of actors involved in evaluation practice beyond only (but including) *evaluators*. These include networks of evaluators, funders, sponsors, commissioners and managers of evaluations, international networks that set evaluation standards (such as the Evaluation Cooperation Group, United Nations Evaluation Group, and OECD Development Assistance Committee), and the social movements and initiatives using evaluative thinking to support their transformation efforts. Artificial Intelligence is increasingly also acting as an evaluation assistant, evaluand, and a force reshaping the evaluation environment.

Evaluator – an actor carrying out an *evaluation*. Some would restrict this term for a person trained in and accountable to the evaluation profession, whereas here we extend it to anyone exercising evaluative *judgement* on an *evaluand*. Especially in Indigenous practice, evaluation is exercised through the relationships and obligations of an extended community, so the question of 'who is the evaluator?' can misframe the practice – an evaluator is not necessarily singular. We also do not preclude the possibility of non-human evaluators. Nonetheless, our gifts of empathy, interpretation through lenses of lived experience and contextual understanding, integrative judgement shaped by ethical reasoning, sensitivity to power and tacit information, and the relational skills necessary to build legitimacy for evaluation findings among diverse stakeholders, make human evaluators exceptionally sophisticated.

External evaluation – an *evaluation* conducted by people from outside the organisation, programme or initiative being evaluated. Externality concerns who carries out the evaluation, not whether they are free from influence over their findings. An external evaluation is not necessarily *independent*, and an internal evaluation is not necessarily lacking in independence. The value of external evaluation lies in the perspective and distance it can bring, particularly where an organisation cannot easily see itself; its limitations include weaker contextual understanding and the risk of being shaped by the interests of those who commission it.

Formative evaluation – a classical form of evaluation conducted during the implementation of a project, programme or other evaluand, to provide feedback that supports learning for its development and improvement.

Global North – see entries for Global South and *West/Western/westernised*.

Global South – broadly refers to countries and societies (many from the Earth's Southern Hemisphere) that share histories of colonisation, of being pushed to the edges of global political and economic systems, and of resisting imposed geopolitical structures (which are often associated with the contrary term 'Global North'). Global South carries both a geographic sense (broadly although not exclusively the regions south of a notional line drawn in the 1980 Brandt Report[5]) and a political sense based on shared experience and solidarity, rather than only on economic status. The category is internally diverse, ranging from rising economic powers to low-income societies, and its boundaries are contested.

'Global South' was coined by the American activist Carl Oglesby in 1969 as a less emotive term for the political concept of resistance to Northern dominance[6], replacing earlier terms such as 'Third World' and 'developing countries'. Further evolutions are evident in more recent terms such as 'Global Majority' and 'Majority World'.

Independent evaluation – an *evaluation* conducted free from undue influence by those with a stake in its findings, including

funders, commissioners, programme managers and other power-holders in the system being evaluated. Independence is a question of governance – reporting lines, mandate, funding arrangements, and freedom to determine scope, methods and conclusions – rather than of physical location.

Independent evaluations are widely regarded as essential where evaluation is being used to hold power accountable, particularly where vested interests in the unsustainable status quo might otherwise capture the evaluation. Some traditions of *transformation-focused evaluation*, however, recognise that *evaluators* are always embedded in the systems they evaluate and bring their own *values* into the work; in these traditions, independence is less about distance and more about the evaluator's willingness and authority to speak honestly regardless of cost.

Judgement – an evaluative statement based on considered reasoning and weighing up a body of evidence.

Learning – the change in knowledge and behaviour as a result of experience[7] (which can include evaluation).

Merit – the intrinsic *value* of something, judged against its own objectives and criteria. A relatively stable form of value compared to *worth*, which varies depending on context.

Principle – a relatively actionable commitment or statement that provides guidance on how to act[8]. A principle could be based on various forms of reasoning, including *values*.

Regenerative futures – an orientation towards supporting the growth of regenerative systems, dynamics and practice that mutually reinforce social and ecological health across multiple scales, such that 'life creates conditions conducive to life'[9].

Significance – whether, how or why something matters and is meaningful. It can be considered a form of *value* that goes beyond *merit* or *worth*, and addresses an *evaluand's* wider or deeper importance.

Summative evaluation – a classical form of *evaluation* conducted at the end of a project, programme or other *evaluand* to assess its overall impacts and effectiveness – typically for accountability and evidence-informed decisions about continuation, further development or scaling.

Transformation – a major, fundamental, systemic change occurring over time. Transformation goes beyond merely technological, behavioural and policy changes, and involves deeper shifts in a system's underlying structures, power relations, beliefs, *values*, intent, purpose, paradigms and worldviews that in turn help to bring about reconfiguration of the system.

Transformation catalyst – an actor that contributes to the *transformation* of a wider system by aggregating, cohering and amplifying actions of individual transformation initiatives[10].

Transformation system – a more-or-less self-aware system of initiatives, organisations and people aligning their efforts in service to the *transformation* of a particular issue or geography in a common direction[11].

Transformation-focused evaluation – *evaluation* practice that contributes to catalysing *transformations* towards *regenerative futures*.

Value – the quality of being valuable. A relatively broad term that can encompass *merit, worth and significance* – how good, useful, important, etc. something is. Value is what *evaluation* seeks to determine.

Values – deeply held beliefs, commitments and moral reasoning that shape what people consider important, good, right, useful, etc. For example, your personal values might include a commitment to peace.

West/Western/westernised – broadly refers to the political, economic, intellectual and cultural traditions associated with historically dominant Euro-American regions (Europe, North America, and further colonial extensions in Australia and Aotearoa / New Zealand). The term is used to denote the institutions, knowledge systems, legal traditions, development models, and forms of global power that have been shaped by European colonialism, capitalism, liberal modernity, and Euro-American dominance. The West is internally diverse, contested, and not synonymous with all people or societies located in Europe or North America. Western ideas, institutions and practices also circulate globally and may be adopted, adapted, or resisted in many non-Western contexts. Thus, West, Western and 'westernised' are used here as relational and historical categories, particularly in terms of how they have shaped the modern field of evaluation – rather than as a fixed civilisational, racial, or geographical identity. They have much overlap with the idea of the 'Global North' (see entry for Global South).

Worth – the more contextualised, comparative *value* of something, typically expressed in terms of something else (e.g. monetary value). This is an object's value 'outside itself' that is socially and ethically situated. It is a relatively dynamic form of value that varies depending on context.



SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

This is an introductory guide to transformation-focused evaluation (TFE): evaluation and learning that contributes to catalysing system change towards regenerative futures. It is aimed particularly at change-makers and other actors, organisations and initiatives interested in *transformation*, and how evaluation practice could help to understand and shape desirable transformations. We hope that it will be of interest to those who commission and fund evaluations as much as other *evaluation actors* who take part in evaluative activity.

It provides a first port of call, rather than comprehensive and detailed guide, for anyone wanting to learn more about:

- what evaluation is, and why we need it;
- what transformation is, and why we need it;
- what TFE is, why we need it, and how we can put it into practice;
- and how we can embed TFE in transformation efforts, illustrated with case studies.

The guide complements and extends several of our other guides:

- *Transformation: An introductory guide to fundamental change for researchers and change makers in a world of crises*, which provides greater detail on the fundamentals of transformation.
- *An introduction to regenerative dynamics*, which provides an entry point into understanding conceptual aspects of regenerative dynamics as well as how they are being applied in case studies around the world.
- *Tools for regenerative practice: 30 frameworks, exercises and methods in service of human and planetary flourishing*, which provides practical tools for groups of people applying regenerative practice.
- *Cohering system change at scale: A guide for transformation-focused change-makers, facilitators and partnerships*, which explains how transformation concepts, cohering partnerships, governance, developing frameworks for action, regenerative orientations, evaluation and learning can all be brought together in transformation-focused initiatives.



SECTION 2: WHAT IS EVALUATION, AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Evaluation can be defined simply as **the process of determining the value of something.**

There are many different forms of value. Some people disaggregate value into *merit*, *worth* and *significance*. Merit refers to the intrinsic value of something, judged against its own objectives and criteria. For example, a tree might be short or tall, young or old, deciduous or evergreen, sturdy or spindly. You might intrinsically value particular kinds of trees, such as the maple trees that turn so vividly yellow and red in autumn in the temperate latitudes.

Worth refers to the more contextualised, comparative value of something, typically expressed in terms of something else. A tree's worth (e.g. for timber or carbon sequestration) might be expressed in monetary terms, or a forest might have greater worth to you than bare fields. This is a relatively dynamic form of value that varies depending on context.

Significance then refers to whether, how or why something matters and is meaningful more broadly. A tree might not have much monetary value, but still have major, priceless significance – as a waymarker, a meeting place, and a keeper of stories, for instance. A single tree regrowing in a forest might not be particularly noteworthy in itself, but could hold great significance if the forest's regeneration has historically been suppressed by poor management or ecological imbalance. A tree that you have been trying to grow in your garden might hold great personal significance because of the time and effort invested into nurturing it.

The process by which an actor (e.g. a person or community) determines the value of something in these ways, is: evaluation. This definition might start to give you a sense of why evaluation has been called "society's most fundamental discipline"[12] (Figure 1).

We are constantly evaluating ourselves and the world around us. When we state our desires, likes, dislikes and priorities, when we consider something as good or bad, when we feel unwell, and when we create, design, and plan – we are evaluating.

When we choose what to buy, whom to vote for, where to live, and whom to make our partner – we are evaluating.

Evaluation is at play when a person is tried in a court, consults a doctor, or sits a school examination.

When a company chooses what to invest in, a project's impact is assessed, a significant statistical result is claimed, or a country decides to go to war – evaluation is taking place.

All economic activity is shaped by the question of what we value – which itself lies at the heart of evaluation practice.

Evaluation thus always has a subjective element, and requires *judgement* on the part of the *evaluator* (see Box 1). Our evaluative judgements are underpinned by our personal and cultural *criteria*, shaped by our *values*, morals, assumptions, beliefs, experiences, and worldviews.

While much of our evaluation practice takes place continuously, informally and often unconsciously in our everyday lives, we have also developed relatively formal, intentional and systematic methods and institutions for evaluation. These can be traced back at least 6000 years to the first recording of taxes and harvests on clay tablets in Mesopotamia[13].

In formal evaluations, criteria tend to be more explicit. Examples include the Sustainable Development Goals, or the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability (applied to *evaluands* such as sustainable development projects).

Criteria, along with the wider lenses and perspectives that filter our evaluation practice, can have remarkable power in steering our societies. Consider how national and international laws, constitutions and declarations provide criteria for legal proceedings, for instance – or how the criterion of GDP growth drives much of our economic activity and unsustainable exploitation of the natural world.

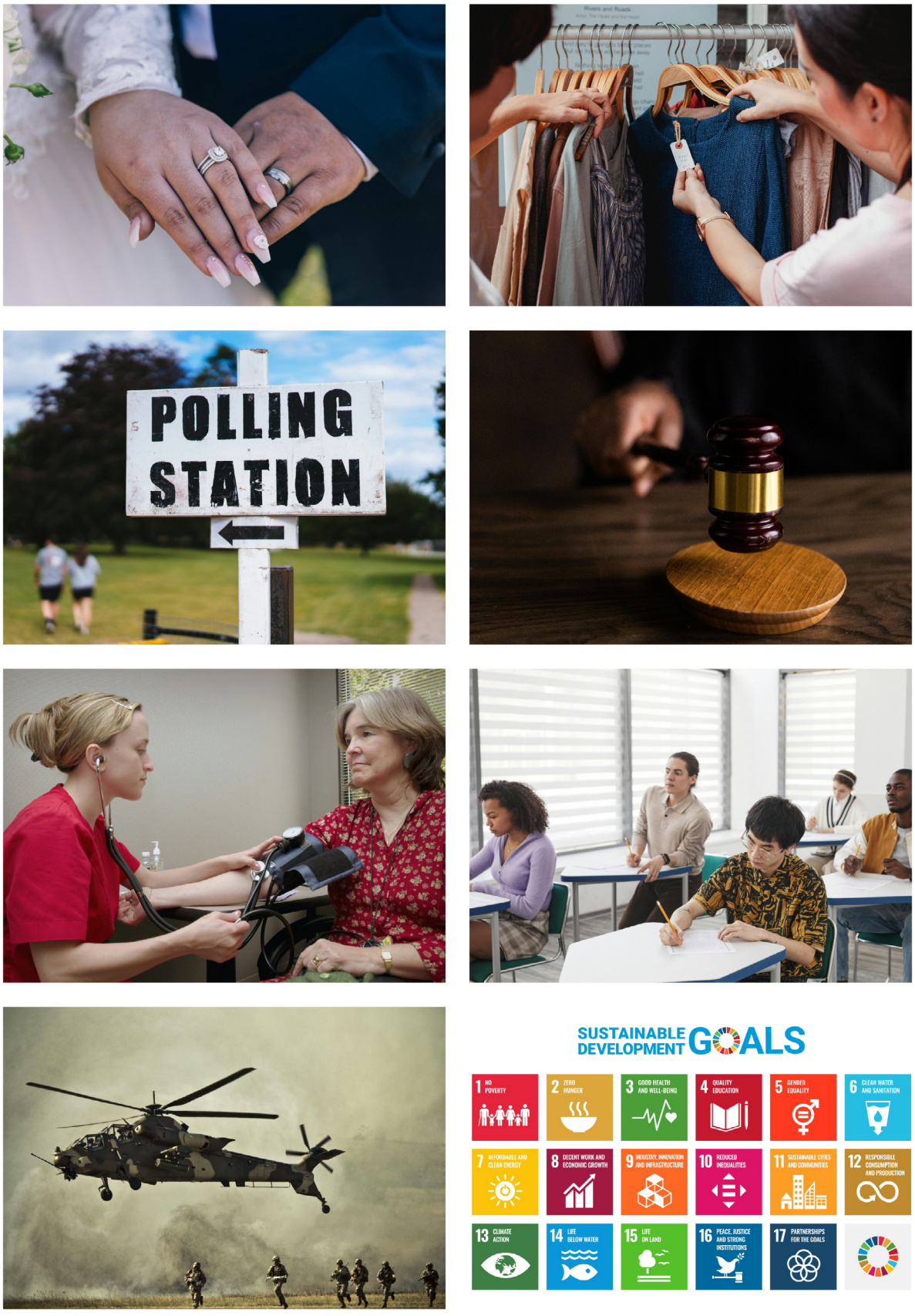


Figure 1. Examples of contexts in human society where evaluation takes place.

Overall, evaluation is fundamental to human activity. Evaluation often carries a reputation as a dull, dry, technical activity, with connotations of punishment and constraint. But evaluation is, and has potential to be, far more than this. Indigenous evaluators promoting and applying Indigenous practices, for instance, can turn evaluation into a powerful tool for cultural preservation, relational accountability and responsibility, collective progress, and ethical leadership[14,15]. How we evaluate has profound implications for the action we choose to take in the world. The criteria, values and perspectives that shape our evaluative methods and judgements have the potential to lead us on a dangerous path of continued unsustainability and collapse, but equally on a path towards transformation and regeneration – as the next sections explain.

Box 1: Evaluation, monitoring, learning, research – what's the difference?



You've probably heard terms like 'monitoring', 'measurement' and 'learning' used in evaluation contexts. These are often incorporated into acronyms like 'ME' (Monitoring and Evaluation) and 'MEL' (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning). 'Research' is also sometimes equated with evaluation, or seen as part of evaluation (MERL). But what do all these different terms actually mean, and how do they differ from each other?

Evaluation (sometimes also referred to as 'assessment' or 'appraisal') can be understood as going beyond just monitoring and measurement. Crucially, evaluation requires some kind of integrative judgement about the quality, value or significance of something – not just tracking metrics and indicators, or otherwise measuring change. Note that 'value' is part of the word 'evaluation', reminding us that evaluation always has a subjective and/or cultural dimension that engages the values that we hold. Evaluation also requires critical, inferential, creative, and practical thinking[8].

While research has many similarities to evaluation[16], it also differs in not necessarily involving such integrative, value-based judgements, and is not necessarily intended for immediate use. Research, monitoring and measurement nonetheless play important roles in informing wider evaluative exercises.

Learning is more about the (desired) outcome of evaluation: the change in knowledge and behaviour as a result of experience[7]. Learning can happen both during and after the process of evaluation – in other words, in both a *formative* and *summative* sense. We would all like to think that evaluation will result in learning – although this is far from guaranteed!

One of the goals of more *transformation-focused evaluation* is to support relatively deep learning that challenges underlying assumptions, values, beliefs and paradigms. You can find out more about transformation and transformation-focused evaluation in Sections 3 and 4 of this guide.



SECTION 3: WHAT IS TRANSFORMATION, AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Our world faces a multitude of interacting and reinforcing crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss, socio-economic inequality, disinformation, political polarisation, and war. Some refer to this situation as a 'polycrisis'. The polycrisis is becoming an existential threat to Earth's continued habitability for humans and the wider biosphere. At the same time, our old ways of thinking and acting in response are rapidly losing relevance in our changing world – a situation referred to by some as a 'metacrisis'.

It is increasingly recognised that such crises cannot be overcome simply by improving existing ways of doing things. For example, although the Green Revolution of the mid-20th century achieved major increases in crop yield efficiency and food security for millions of people, it also exacerbated the degradation of the natural world that is now contributing to crop losses and food insecurity from extreme weather, pests and disease. Instead, we urgently need *transformation* that transcends the systems and mindsets that have led to and perpetuate contemporary challenges.

Transformations have been conceptualised in many different ways (Box 2), but in essence, transformation is:

1. A fundamental systemic change occurring over time.
2. Qualitatively distinct from more superficial forms of change.
3. Subjective and normative.
4. Across different scales.
5. Emergent or intentional.

Box 2: Frameworks for conceptualising transformation

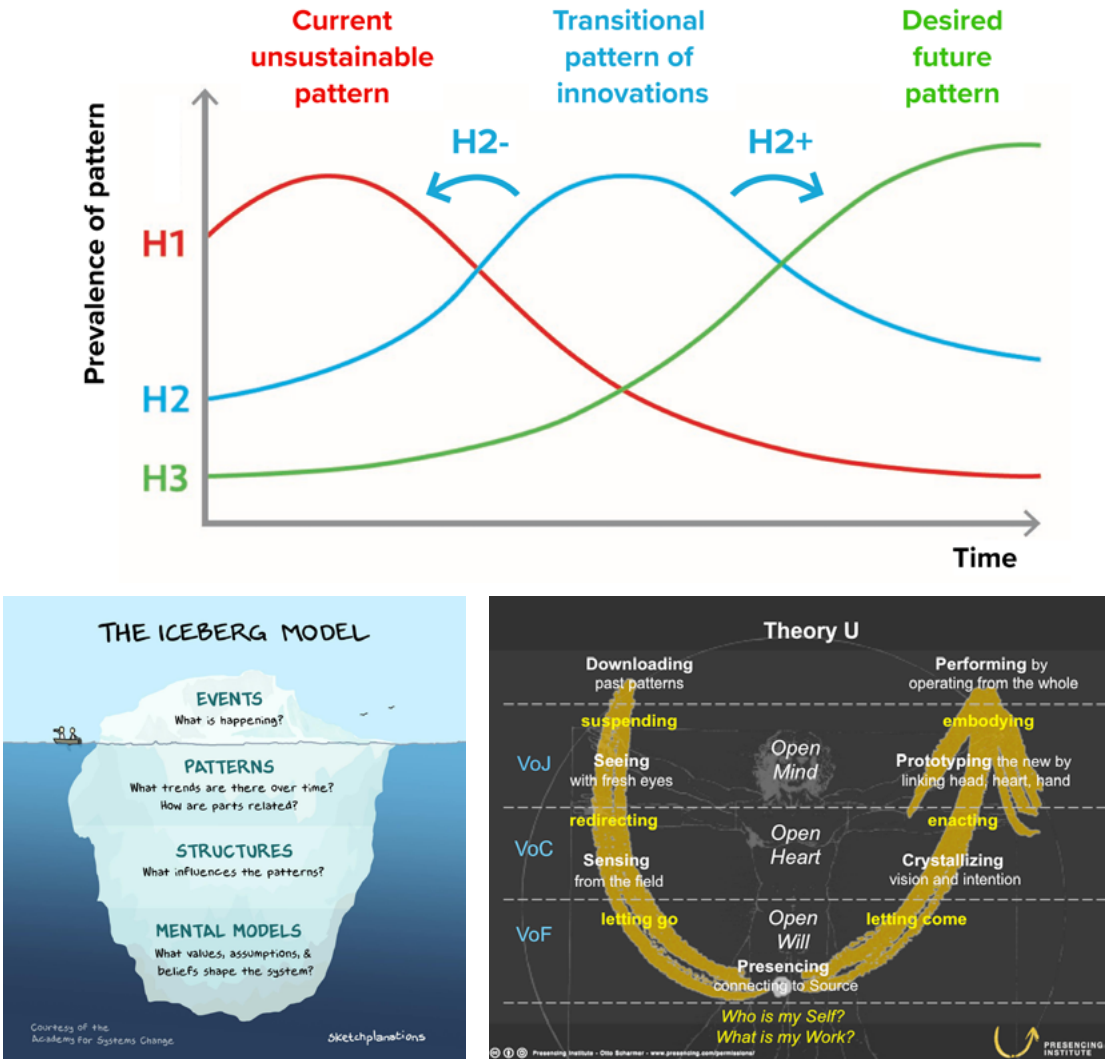


Figure 2. Several different frameworks conceptualising transformation. Top, Three Horizons; bottom left, the Iceberg Model; bottom right, Theory U.

There are many different frameworks for conceptualising transformation. A selection of these is listed below. Further examples can be found in our guide about *Transformation: An introductory guide to fundamental change for researchers and change makers in a world of crises.*

The Three Horizons framework (Figure 2) considers societal transformations as three horizons extending into the future. Horizon 1 represents our current ways of doing things, which are losing their fitness for purpose as the wider context changes. Horizon 3 represents an envisioned, radically different future that a collective of people wish to bring into being. Horizon 2 then represents a transitional space of innovations, some of which prop up Horizon 1 (H2- innovations), and some of which genuinely create space for Horizon 3 to emerge (H2+ innovations).

The Iceberg Model (Figure 2) is related to Donella Meadows' leverage points framework[17,18]. It distinguishes between different levels of change and intervention in a system. The deeper down the iceberg you go, the more transformative an intervention is likely to be, but also harder to achieve. The levels progress from surface-level 'events', to 'patterns' and trends of events over time, to the 'structures' and mechanisms underlying the observed patterns, and

finally to the deepest level, people's 'mental models' underpinning the system.

The Theory U framework (Figure 2) aims to enhance people's perception of the transformed future that is trying to emerge, and allow that future to be expressed. It conceptualises this transformation as a series of 'movements'. These movements first uncover the common intent of a group, and build capacity to sense systems in a holistic way. A connection is then made to a deeper source of inspiration, motivation and will, and old assumptions and resistances are relinquished. Finally, new patterns are iteratively prototyped and institutionalised, with a learning-by-doing approach.

The Multi-Level Perspective explains how socio-technical transitions occur through the interaction of three nested levels: niche innovations (micro), regimes (meso), and wider landscapes (macro). For example, a farm applying regenerative agriculture might be a niche innovation, situated within the regime of a regional food system, which in turn is situated within a wider landscape of international economic dynamics and climate change. For transformation to occur, niche innovations must grow, spread and break through into regimes. Over time, multiple new regimes might shift the overarching landscape.

The theory of panarchy and adaptive cycles (named after the unpredictable behaviour of Pan, the Greek god of nature) suggests that many human social systems (organisations, countries, societies, etc.) and ecological systems (forests, landscapes, etc.) go through repeated cycles of transformation. These cycles have four main phases: growth, conservation, release, and reorganisation. In other words, the system grows, consolidates and stabilises, before a period of release, collapse and disintegration (potentially from a disruptive event), from which renewal and reorganisation emerges. For example, in some forests natural, periodic wildfires are essential for maintaining the forest's health and triggering trees' seed germination; or an autocratic political regime might emerge and establish itself in power, before a revolution that dismantles the regime and gives rise to a new form of democratic government.

There are many examples of transformation frameworks from beyond *Western* contexts – such as the Medicine Wheels of North American First Nations, *Swaraj* from Gandhian philosophy, and Buddhist frameworks of personal transformation.

1. A fundamental systemic change occurring over time

In essence, a transformation is a major, fundamental, systemic change occurring over time. It goes beyond merely technological, behavioural and policy changes, and involves deeper shifts in a system's underlying structures, power relations, beliefs, values, intent, purpose, paradigms and worldviews – which in turn help to bring about reconfiguration of the system. A transformation is rarely instantaneous, particularly at the large scales of human societies, and may take years or decades. Examples from human history include the Agricultural Revolution of the Neolithic period from c. 10,000 BCE, the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, and the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries.

2. Qualitatively distinct from more superficial forms of change

Transformation is qualitatively different from more marginal and superficial change, which might be termed adjustments or reforms. Such change is often 'change to keep things the same' that tweaks a system to improve and maintain it, without fundamentally altering its core characteristics, purpose, and underlying causes. We see a lot of this kind of change in human societies, such as incremental improvements in the efficiency of technological processes. This does not preclude the importance of reforms, adjustments and incremental change as part of a wider transformation if their underlying intentionality is transformation-oriented.

A helpful analogy of this contrast is the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. In this transformation, a caterpillar actively dissolves itself in a chrysalis, reallocating the same resources to create something new. Rather than more superficial change to produce a fatter, fitter, faster caterpillar, the transformation involves a shift to something with a very different function, ability, and purpose – from a crawling eating

machine to something that can fly, drink nectar, and procreate.

3. Subjective and normative

The outcome of a transformation could be positive or negative, depending on the perspectives and values of different actors and cultures. One person or culture might see the Industrial Revolution as a positive transformation because it meant we could produce useful things for people far more efficiently and cheaply, but another might see it as catastrophic because of its associated environmental damage (including climate change). Transformations therefore always have a subjective and cultural dimension.

Transformations are also normative. This applies to the orientation that we choose for transformations. An increasingly advocated orientation – and one that we apply in this guide – is towards regenerative dynamics and futures (Box 3). Regenerative dynamics describe how social and ecological health could reinforce each other across multiple scales, such that 'life creates conditions conducive to life'[9]. A regenerative business, for example, would not only be taking care of its employees and finances. It would also actively be contributing to the health of wider society and ecosystems on which the business ultimately depends for its long-term survival and flourishing. This is transformatively different to how most *westernised* societies currently operate.

Regenerative dynamics provide a powerful framing because they call us to address the degenerative dynamics underlying contemporary crises, go beyond merely reducing or slowing further harm, and bridge the profound sense of separation between humans and nature in westernised cultures. Regeneration also provides an orientation filled with inspiration, abundance, and hope, in stark contrast to doom-laden narratives reinforced by mainstream media.

Regenerative futures are just one orientation among many currently discussed in transformation thinking and practice, however. The choice between these orientations is itself a *value judgement*, and evaluators will encounter this plurality in practice. Different actors and communities will hold different narratives. A useful evaluative skill is therefore the ability to recognise which narrative about transformation an initiative is implicitly working with, and to surface that for reflection.

Box 3: The Regenerative Lens for orienting transformations towards regenerative futures

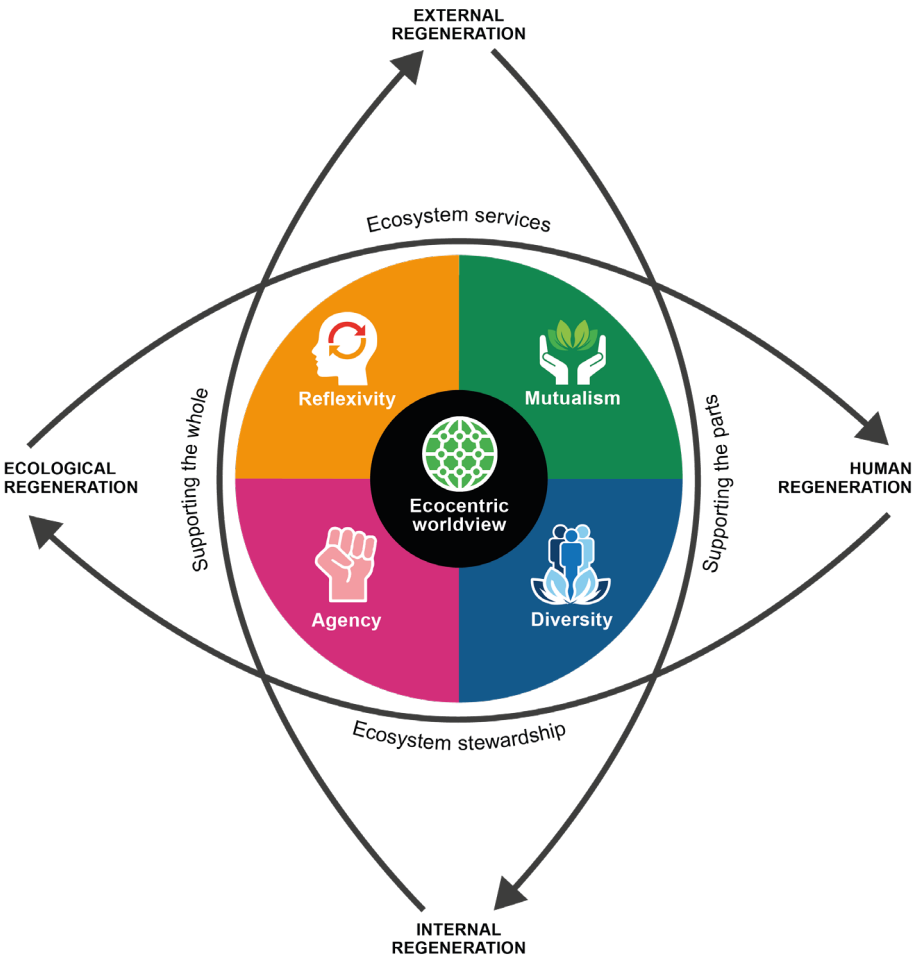


Figure 3. The Regenerative Lens framework. Figure designed by Sam Buckton, based on recent research[19], and rendered by Dave Gledhill of 1790 Creative Ltd. See Appendix for a more detailed version of the diagram.

The Regenerative Lens (Figure 3) is an evaluative tool that summarises the orientation towards regenerative futures and dynamics urged for *transformation-focused evaluation*. It originates from conceptual work by Bill Sharpe, Anthony Hodgson and Daniel Wahl, and was additionally shaped by other members of Regenesis Group, H3Uni and International Futures Forum, along with an integrative literature review by Sam Buckton and colleagues[19]. The framework can be used as a 'lens' to evaluate the extent to which envisioned futures, strategies and initiatives reflect regenerative dynamics.

The Regenerative Lens defines a regenerative system as one that maintains positive reinforcing cycles of health both within and beyond itself across multiple scales, such that 'life creates conditions conducive to life'[9]. Such dynamics are core to life itself. They explain how living systems self-organise to create interacting, interdependent networks that build, maintain, repair and reproduce themselves whilst also continuously adapting, innovating, and evolving. But over time, many human societies have become severely misaligned with life's regenerative processes.

The framework emphasises that an individual, community, organisation, initiative or sector would need to not only look after its internal health (e.g. the finances and employees of a business), but also the health of the wider systems that it lies within (e.g. the natural resources of its surrounding region), which in turn supports its internal health. This is summarised as a reinforcing loop between 'internal regeneration' and 'external regeneration'.

The Lens also highlights that this kind of reinforcing dynamic between self and whole is particularly important to establish not just within human societies, but between humans and wider nature. By acting as caring stewards of nature, we can not only protect nature's health for its own sake and the diverse value it holds, but also continue to benefit from the wealth of ecosystem services that it provides us. This is summarised by a reinforcing loop between 'human regeneration' and 'ecological regeneration'.

This framework additionally identifies five key 'qualities' that have been pointed out as critical to encourage regenerative dynamics: an ecocentric worldview, mutualistic interactions, ecological and cultural diversity, agency for the regenerative expression of humans and life more widely, and continuous reflexivity[19].

The Regenerative Lens illustrates the kind of orientation that transformation-focused evaluators are encouraged to embed in their work as an ethical imperative. For more detail about regenerative dynamics and practice, see our other two guides: *An introduction to regenerative dynamics* and *Tools for regenerative practice: 30 frameworks, exercises and methods in service of human and planetary flourishing*.

4. Across different scales

Transformations can take place across a wide range of spatial and temporal scales. They might be the level of an individual, family, community, organisation, sector, region, nation, or even the entire Earth. Transformation at one scale is often dependent on change at wider or lesser scales: for example, 'inner' transformations of values and mindsets are often necessary for 'outer' transformations of physical structures. Equally, something transformative at one scale might not be transformative at another. If a community transforms into an ecovillage, it won't necessarily transform the way of living in the wider country it's situated in. And while they are rarely instantaneous, transformations do vary substantially in the time they take to occur. The current rise of Artificial Intelligence and its impacts on human knowledge systems might be seen as a rapid transformation, whereas the rise of capitalist economies across the world was a much slower transformation over several centuries.

5. Emergent or intentional

Many transformations happen whether we like it or not. Pandemics throughout human history are one example. One of the most cataclysmic transformations ever to face planetary life will take place in around 1 billion years, when the Earth will become largely uninhabitable from extreme heat as our Sun's luminosity increases. But transformations can also be guided and stewarded in desired directions by intentional human action. Examples might include a person who heals from trauma, a business that becomes carbon-negative, a food system that develops regenerative dynamics, or an alliance of nations that collectively shifts global energy markets towards renewables. Even then, systems are never completely in our control, and will always display complexity, unpredictability and emergence during transformations.

Evaluation must therefore increasingly engage with the concept, phenomenon and practice of transformations, including transformations towards regenerative futures. The next section explains the intersection of evaluation and transformation, and why we need *transformation-focused evaluation.*



SECTION 4: WHAT IS TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION, AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Evaluation has a number of critical roles to play in contexts of transformation. Without dedicated evaluation effort, we will not know if desired transformations are occurring, what the impacts of transformations are, how interventions are contributing (or not) to transformation, and how to adapt and respond appropriately to change. Overall, our learning about how to steward desired transformations would be severely limited.

Key roles for evaluation include:

- Assessing and maintaining initiatives' focus and intent on transformation and *regenerative futures*, as well as the hope that such change and futures are possible.
- Enabling agility and rapid adaptation to dynamic conditions.
- Making sense of complex system changes and how interventions influence them, and recognising important signals and patterns in seas of data.
- Encouraging reflexivity and deeper forms of learning that challenge underlying structures, power relations, beliefs, values, intent, purpose, paradigms and worldviews.
- Ultimately, enabling us to take wiser and more effective action to navigate our transforming world, nurture existing regenerative practice, and stimulate desired transformations towards regenerative futures.

But many classical forms of evaluation are poorly equipped to fulfill these roles, and confront the complexity and power dynamics inherent in transformation contexts. The modern discipline and profession of evaluation that evolved within the last century has been strongly shaped by *Western* perspectives, due to power asymmetries more than inherent *value*. This globalised evaluation model grew primarily from the need to financially audit recovery efforts following World War II[20,21]. It was geared towards supporting discrete, isolated projects, underpinned by assumptions of certainty and predictability, focused on quantification and financialisation, assessing progress on predetermined objectives in linear theories of change, and encouraging relatively marginal and superficial improvements to existing systems[22–24].

Such evaluation models are now outdated and mismatched to the demands of evaluation in our transforming world. Accordingly, in the words of evaluator Michael Quinn Patton: **"evaluating transformation means transforming evaluation"**[24]. Fundamental shifts are required across multiple dimensions of evaluation practice if evaluation is to become truly transformation-focused (Table 1). Some of these shifts are recognised in the recent Prague Declaration on Evaluation for Transformational Change (Box 4).

Table 1. Examples of the shifts required for evaluation practice to fulfill the new roles and capabilities demanded by societal transformations.
For further examples and references, see Buckton et al.[25]

Shift theme	Features of conventional evaluation of Western origin	Features of transformation-focused evaluation	Why the shift is needed
Complexity awareness	A reductionist Enlightenment worldview that treats *evaluands* as isolated projects	A relational, complexity-informed worldview that appreciates *evaluands* as nested and interconnected	This shift brings evaluation closer to the reality of how complex systems behave in transformations. Transformations take place in open systems that transcend political or institutional boundaries and specialised interests.
	Evaluating against static, linear logic models and theories of change	Continually supporting revision of complexity-informed, adaptive theories of change and transformation	Complex system conditions are never static, and much of their behaviour is beyond the control of individual transformation-focused initiatives. So initiatives need to frequently adapt their objectives and theories of change as new information arises, to avoid them losing relevance. Linear theories of change are also poorly reflective of how change actually occurs in complex systems.
	Seeking causal attribution	Seeking relative contribution to change	Although experimentally controlled designs (e.g. including comparative counterfactual systems that have not received an intervention delivered elsewhere) can enable more certain conclusions about an initiative's impact, they typically fail to capture the effects of other influences and unintended outcomes which characterise complex systems change. These are better captured by methods such as contribution analysis.
	Evaluations at fixed, predetermined timepoints (e.g. *formative* and *summative evaluation*)	Evaluation more continuous and/or applied when needs arise	Without this shift, initiatives will struggle to respond and adapt with the speed required to match the dynamism of system change.
	Criteria for assessing change focus on relatively minor, small-scale, superficial adjustments and reforms	Criteria for assessing change also focus on evidence for large-scale, systemic transformation and regenerative dynamics, and how interventions contribute to these	To overcome global crises, large-scale, systemic, societal transformations are urgently required; more marginal or superficial change alone is insufficient.
	Short- to medium-term time horizon	Long-term time horizon, appreciating how short- to medium-term horizons contribute	Intentionally stewarded transformations are often long-term phenomena, taking place over decades. Circumstances are also forever changing, so an initiative's outcomes are by no means guaranteed to continue being effective or relevant into the future – and today's actors have a duty to support the health of future generations. Foresight methods (see below) could increase initiatives' resilience to future changing conditions.

Shift theme	Features of conventional evaluation of Western origin	Features of transformation-focused evaluation	Why the shift is needed
Complexity awareness	Short- to medium-term time horizon	Long-term time horizon, appreciating how short- to medium-term horizons contribute	Intentionally stewarded transformations are often long-term phenomena, taking place over decades. Circumstances are also forever changing, so an initiative's outcomes are by no means guaranteed to continue being effective or relevant into the future – and today's actors have a duty to support the health of future generations. Foresight methods (see below) could increase initiatives' resilience to future changing conditions.
	Focus on evidence from the past and present	Also draws on foresight methods, including exploration of desired futures and possible or feasible future scenarios	Evaluation based only on evidence from the past and present has been likened to driving a car forwards whilst looking in the rearview mirror. Drawing on foresight makes initiatives more likely to remain effective and relevant into the future. Exploring desired *regenerative futures* with radically different dynamics could also inspire hope and more transformative action in the present.
	Focus on monitoring quantitative metrics and 'cold data'	Mixed-methods approach to data collection that emphasises 'warm data'	This shift provides a much richer picture of systems and their transformation, helping initiatives to navigate the inherent complexity and uncertainty of complex systems. There are also multiple subjective realities in a complex system, emphasising the importance of obtaining multiple perspectives on system change to gain a more holistic and robust understanding. Focusing solely on quantitative indicators distracts from a wider spectrum of learning opportunities, and often brushes over the value judgements inherent in choosing indicators.
	Focused on finding quick, safe answers and (re)solutions	Comfortable in ambiguity, uncertainty, and audacious but well-informed experimentation	Focusing on quick wins and answers risks overlooking wiser transformational action that might arise from spending longer in an exploratory or experimental mode.
	Standardisation and assumption of replicability	Contextualisation and continual questioning of external validity	All evaluands are unique, and blindly applying standardised methods because they are the 'done thing' or recognised as a 'gold standard' without consideration of their suitability to context risks applying inappropriate methods that fail to maximise the transformational potential of an initiative. Regenerative practice in particular emphasises the importance of deeply understanding the relationships, dynamics, needs and potential of particular places.

Shift theme	Features of conventional evaluation of Western origin	Features of transformation-focused evaluation	Why the shift is needed
Power relations and purpose	Assumption of humans as separate from and more important than the rest of nature	Humanity recognised as inextricably and interdependently part of nature	The worldview of human-nature separation, itself a fallacy, is acknowledged as one of the key drivers of global crises. It risks careless damage and destruction of nature that ultimately threatens human survival.
	Evaluation seen as discrete, formal, technical activity	Evaluation understood as a fundamental, universal, continuous human activity, as well as formal and systematic activity	This shift helps to catalyse transformations by enrolling *all* actors into transformation-focused evaluative activity and enhancing reflexivity.
	Evaluation seen as outside system change processes	Evaluation recognised as an intervention that is part of system change processes	This shift opens up far more opportunities for evaluation to play supportive, developmental or even transformational roles in *transformation systems* rather than only remotely judging initiatives. With this said, more *independent* or *external evaluations* can play important roles in TFE in some contexts to hold organisations more strongly to account or provide wider perspectives, where there would otherwise be a high risk of bias, cherry-picking and greenwashing, or an *evaluand* would otherwise struggle to step back and observe itself holistically.
	Evaluator assumed to be value-neutral/objective	Evaluators recognise their moral responsibility as members of the system in question, and are activists promoting values of regeneration and justice	This shift away from the fallacy of value-neutrality enables evaluation to play a much more direct role in stimulating desired transformations. In some contexts this means evaluators become embedded advocates for regeneration and justice. In others, particularly where *external* or *independent* voice is needed, it means using a more removed position to ask questions that an embedded evaluator might not readily be in a position to ask. In any case, a more activist stance does not excuse evaluators from remaining reflexive, honest, aware of their positionality and stake in the matter at hand, and contextually adaptive.
	Evaluation design shaped mainly by funders and commissioners	Evaluation design shaped mainly by primary stakeholders of evaluated interventions	This counters colonial approaches that (sometimes inadvertently) impose certain worldviews without considering their appropriateness to the context at hand. This shift is also likely to increase the usefulness and utilisation of evaluations for intended transformation-focused users. Note that *independent* or *external evaluations* will at times legitimately be shaped by commissioners, provided that they themselves uphold the principles of TFE.

Shift theme	Features of conventional evaluation of Western origin	Features of transformation-focused evaluation	Why the shift is needed
Power relations and purpose	Accountability mainly to funders (value for money)	Broader accountability to the flourishing of society, nature and the planet, future and past generations, etc.	Funder-centred accountability underpins many of the other limitations of conventional *Western*-derived evaluation, including a tendency to replace rounded judgment with standardised quantitative and financial measurement, as well as risk-aversion and a pressure to demonstrate success (rather than potentially more useful learning from experimentation and failure), limiting audacious transformative action. It can also distract from the deeper mission of transformation-focused initiatives.
	Evaluators don't 'bite the hand that feeds them'	Evaluators challenge, and if necessary refuse to engage with, evaluations that are mostly for cosmetic purposes	This avoids evaluation continuing to prop up and legitimise unsustainable and unethical activities (e.g. greenwashing or transformation-washing) that hold back desirable transformations.
	Evaluators are primarily directive experts who assess others	Evaluators also position themselves, with humility and reflexivity, as embedded or *external* facilitators who build others' evaluative capacity	This shift increases the likelihood of initiatives' long-term effectiveness and momentum, with lower dependency on short-term evaluator contracts, and also reinforces the nature of evaluation as a universal practice. This does not preclude the vital importance of more independent or *external* transformation-focused evaluations, however (e.g. to hold power to account).
	Elevation of *Western* and epistemic forms of knowledge	Draws on and honours diverse epistemologies and wisdom	As well as enriching understanding of systems change, this shift is also important for decolonising evaluation and ensuring that certain worldviews are not inappropriately imposed on evaluated systems, perpetuating the marginalisation of non-Western (e.g. Indigenous, African, Eastern) wisdom.
	Treats inequalities and discrimination as contextual issues outside evaluation's remit	Problematises and contributes to addressing inequalities and discrimination	This shift means that evaluation plays a much more active part in engaging with the power structures that must be reconfigured in transformations to *regenerative futures.*
	Isolated individual evaluations	Cross-talk and partnerships between different evaluations	This shift helps to avoid duplication and incongruence between initiatives and their evaluations, and instead builds much stronger partnerships of *transformation catalysts* aligned to driving transformation towards *regenerative futures.* It can build and consolidate knowledge more quickly (e.g. through meta-analyses and meta-syntheses).

Box 4: The Prague Declaration on Evaluation for Transformational Change



The Prague Declaration on Evaluation for Transformational Change is a set of pledges for transformational evaluation agreed by evaluators, commissioners, parliamentarians and other evaluation users at the Third International Conference on Evaluating Environment and Development in Prague in October 2019. It is a statement of intent for global application of transformation-focused evaluation (TFE), laying out a set of ten principles that resonate strongly with the twelve principles for TFE described in this guide. These principles include:

1. promoting transformational evaluation for the Sustainable Development Goals;
2. working in partnership;
3. exploring power relations and promoting inclusiveness;
4. respect for rights and responsibilities;
5. support for professionalisation and capacity development for evaluation;
6. focus on sustainability;
7. focus on areas of fragility, conflict and violence;
8. support for transformational Indigenous evaluation;
9. shared responsibility for evaluation results; and
10. continuing to deepen understanding of the transformations required across the evaluation field.

During the 4th Conference on Evaluating Environment and Development in March 2024 in Washington, DC, delegates reviewed an updated and expanded draft of statement 6 of the Prague Declaration ('focus on sustainability'). The resulting free-standing statement of commitment was published on Earth Day 2024 as the Earth Day Evaluation Declaration. This declaration calls on evaluators and evaluation commissioners to introduce context-specific criteria for environmental, social, and economic sustainability and regeneration into all evaluations, recognising their universal importance and interdependence.

Recent work drew on a large review of academic and grey literature to identify twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation (TFE) (Figure 4; Box 5; Appendix) that embodies the kinds of shifts outlined in Table 1, as well as relevant approaches, methods, *criteria*, frameworks and tools for operationalising those principles[26]. While Indigenous and *Global South* scholarship was represented in the literature sample, the sample was dominated by thinkers from the *Global North*, and mostly reflects efforts in the *Western*-derived evaluation field to relearn long-held traditions in evaluation practice outside of this context (Box 6).

Based on this work, TFE is defined as ***evaluation practice that contributes to catalysing transformations towards regenerative futures.*** Importantly, TFE takes a more active and normative role in seeking and encouraging desired transformations rather than only providing passive support. It is also seen as a continuous part of change processes rather than removed from them – which is generally assumed for conventional *summative evaluations*, for instance. Even relatively *independent* or *external* transformation-focused evaluations can carry such an ethical and systemic awareness. Without adopting a stronger transformational purpose, evaluation risks continuing to prop up relatively superficial, marginal or isolated action that fails to alter the underlying dynamics, power structures, and paradigms behind unsustainability.

This is not the only definition of TFE. Others consider TFE as more of a spectrum of approaches, including evaluation of, for and as transformation (Box 7). In this guide, we define TFE in its most transformative sense – evaluation that not only provides insight into the impacts of transformations and developmental feedback for transformation initiatives, but also strives to actively support and embody transformation in its ethics and approach. Note that TFE is different from Donna Mertens' Transformative Evaluation approach, although they share some similar principles.



Figure 4. Twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation. For more detailed principles, see Appendix and the original paper by Sam Buckton and colleagues[26].

Box 5: A poetic summary of twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation

For the more poetically minded, the twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation have been expressed as a set of concise haikus[27]. The haikus are colour-coded according to the three broad categories of principle: green for the Complexity Principles, purple for the Power Principles, and blue for the Purpose Principles.

1

The world is nested,
tangled, interdependent.
See complexity.

2

Adapt to context:
every transformation
has unique features.

3

Be a detective:
use diverse tools, perspectives
on uncertainty.

4

Change is dynamic,
emergent. Remain wary,
agile, adaptive.

5

Look to the future –
the possible, desired –
with a long-term view.

6

Seek justice: uphold
rights, decolonise, honour
the unheard voices.

7

Guide rather than lead:
shift power to the users.
You're one of the team.

8

Beware the '-washers':
stand by your ethical stance.
Speak truth to power.

9

Foster partnerships
across boundaries. Efforts
should align for change.

10

Put the value back
into evaluation:
surface and question.

11

Be accountable
for learning, not pre-planned change.
Fail and learn. Learn deep.

12

Seek transformation:
regenerative futures
where life can flourish.

Box 6: Older traditions of transformation-focused evaluation



Figure 6. A sign reading 'wu wei' (無爲) from the Imperial Palace in Beijing, China. Wu wei is an example of a non-Western evaluative principle that modern transformation-focused evaluation seeks to relearn – in this case a Taoist principle of non-coercive action that aligns with the grain of a system rather than imposing on it. Note that the sign is intended to be read from right to left. Photo by Fraxinus2 via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Evaluation traditions outside the modern *Western*-shaped evaluation field have long held versions of what transformation-focused evaluation is now articulating. Examples include:

- The Seventh Generation principle from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's *Gayanashagowa* (Great Law of Peace), which teaches that decisions should consider effects on those not yet born but who will inherit the world. It has informed Indigenous evaluation and assessment practice, including culturally responsive programme evaluation and Indigenous-led impact assessment, as a lens for long-term responsibility.
- *Mino Bimaadiziwin*, an Anishinaabe set of principles often interpreted as living well or living a good life, which frames wellbeing through balanced, respectful relations among people, community, land and Creation. It has also informed Anishinaabe-led evaluation practice, particularly in health and community wellbeing contexts, by centring relational wellbeing, learning and responsibilities across generations.
- *Talanoa* and *vanua/whenua* approaches from the Pacific. *Talanoa* is a Pacific dialogic and storytelling practice grounded in relationship, openness and trust, often undertaken

without a rigid preset framework. In 2017, COP23 launched the Talanoa Dialogue as an inclusive process to take stock of collective climate efforts and inform greater ambition. *Vanua* in Fijian, Vanuatuan and other Pacific island contexts, and *whenua* in *te ao Māori*, express relationships among land, people, ancestors, the more-than-human world, spirituality and responsibilities across time. These concepts inform Pacific and Māori evaluation practice by emphasising relational accountability, value held in and through relationship, ecological connection and intergenerational responsibility.

- Context-rooted, communal evaluation in Made in Africa Evaluation, anchored in the philosophy of *ubuntu* (interdependence) and *ukama* (relatedness), and pushing back against extractive evaluation imposed from elsewhere.
- The *Sumak Kawsay / Buen Vivir* planning frameworks of Ecuador and Bolivia, drawn from Andean Quechua and Aymara cosmologies, provide constitutional and policy-level alternatives to growth-based development *criteria*, assessing transformation against wellbeing, plurinationality, and the rights of nature. They redefine the criteria of progress against which an evaluative judgement could be made.
- *La sistematización de experiencias*, a Latin American and Caribbean approach associated with popular education, participatory research, and social practice since the 1970s, offers a structured but flexible methodology for the critical reconstruction and interpretation of one or more lived experiences. It seeks to make explicit the logic and meaning of a process, including the factors that shaped it and how they interacted. It serves as a learning methodology as well as an analytical one; its central commitment is to learning from and with practice, generating cumulative knowledge through critical reflection rather than through extraction[28].
- *Muḥāsaba* and Islamic traditions of structured ethical reflection. Muḥāsaba, often rendered as self-accounting or self-examination, is a long-standing Islamic ethical and spiritual practice of reviewing one's actions, intentions and inner states in light of ethical and religious commitments. It is especially associated with the ninth-century scholar al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibi. The practice was elaborated in later Islamic ethical and Sufi traditions, alongside concepts such as *iḥsān* (excellence or acting with awareness before God) and *adab* (norms of proper conduct). While not an evaluation method in the modern formal sense, muḥāsaba offers a historically deep model of disciplined reflective self-accountability, with conceptual affinities to evaluation approaches that emphasise values, learning and reflective ethical practice.
- East Asian evaluative traditions including Confucian self-cultivation, Buddhist reflective practice, and the Taoist principle of *wu wei* (Figure 6): non-coercive action that aligns with the grain of a system rather than imposing on it.

These are not exotic supplements to a Western-established core practice. They are evaluative practices in their own right, and TFE is in an important sense an attempt to relearn what they have long held, while remaining alert to the ways conventional evaluation theory and practice can appropriate them. Working with these traditions on their own terms requires appropriate invitation, attribution and care.

Box 7: Four lenses on the evaluation-transformation nexus

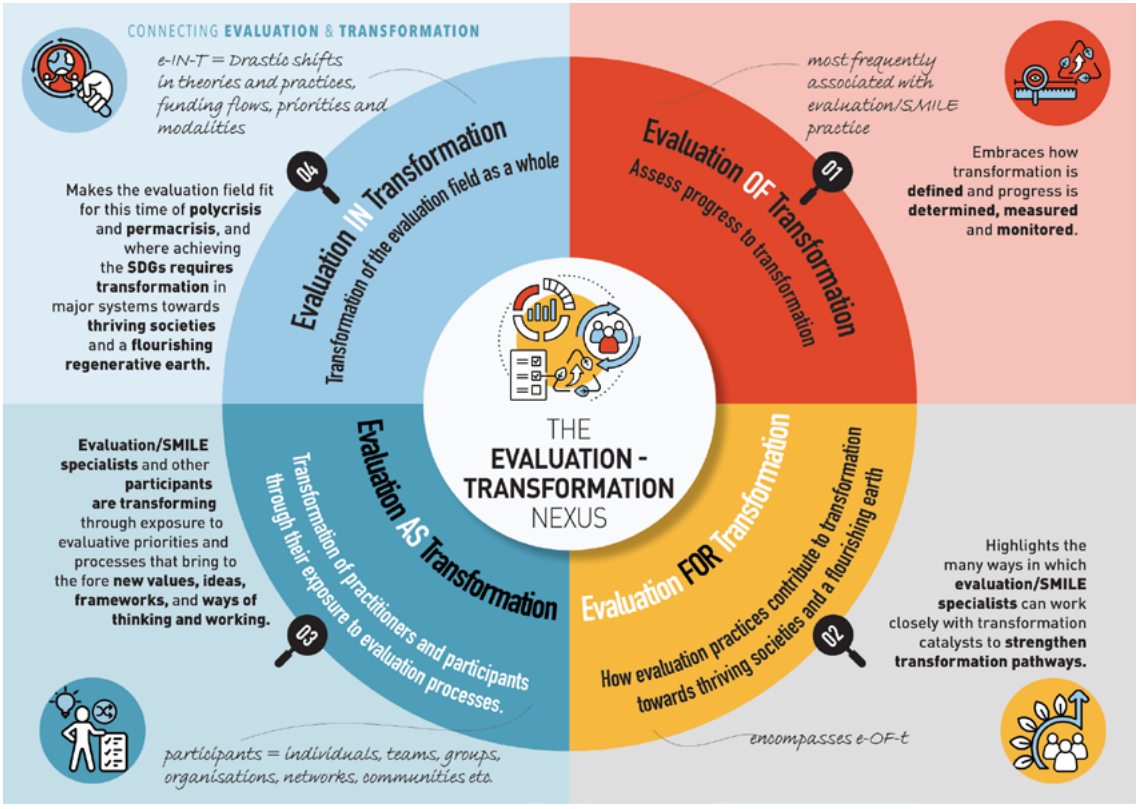


Figure 5. Four lenses on the evaluation-transformation nexus. Originally created by Zenda Ofir and subsequently fleshed out by John Colvin and other members of the Transforming Evaluation collective[29]. Rendered by Sabrina Trautman of KANDS Collective.

The description of TFE in this guide draws on and complements recent work by Zenda Ofir, John Colvin and colleagues in the Transforming Evaluation collective[29], which sets out four distinct but related lenses on the evaluation-transformation nexus (Figure 5):

- Evaluation OF transformation (e-OF-t) – assessing whether and how transformations are occurring, often from a position of analytical *independence* from the effort under study.
- Evaluation FOR transformation (e-FOR-t) – actively supporting those working to change systems, with evaluators acting as catalysts as well as analysts.
- Evaluation AS transformation (e-AS-t) – evaluative practice that shifts the values, mindsets and relationships of those involved in doing it.
- Evaluation IN transformation (e-IN-t) – transformation of the evaluation field itself, so that institutions, training, demand structures and standards become fit for the work.

The twelve principles discussed in this guide describe shifts that, taken together, strengthen evaluation across this full spectrum. Some principles speak more strongly to e-FOR-t and e-AS-t (particularly the Power Shift, Values, Learning, and Transformation Principles). Others apply equally well to e-OF-t practice that often retains a measure of distance from the transformation effort under study (such as the Complex Systems, Context, Detective, and Foresight Principles).

Evidence for the contribution of evaluation to transformations is still emerging, but the best-documented cases show evaluation acting in normative, direction-setting ways and shaping the change process – indicating its potential contributions to catalysing transformations.

The four lenses framework helps to clarify the scope of TFE. As we describe it here, TFE is a family of practices in service of transformation, in which the choice between (and combinations of) the lenses is itself an evaluative judgement, made in context. At the same time, we urge *evaluation actors* towards evaluation *for* and *as* transformation – where this is possible and appropriate – to maximise the transformational potential of evaluation.

The next part of this section explains each of the twelve principles for TFE and how they could be implemented in practice. Each principle includes a brief explanation, examples of the kinds of associated questions that you might ask in an evaluation, and suggestions of approaches, methods, *criteria*, frameworks and tools that you could use when putting the principle into practice. For further examples and references, see the original paper by Sam Buckton and colleagues[26].



COMPLEXITY PRINCIPLES

1. Complex Systems Principle

The Complex Systems Principle encourages you to treat *evaluands* as nested, entangled systems with complex interactions, rather than isolated, independent, 'closed' systems. This provides a much more accurate perspective on how the world works in contexts of transformation. Relational and systemic thinking has long been foundational in many Indigenous, African and Asian traditions.

QUESTIONS

- Are we keeping an eye on the 'bigger picture' and local-to-global linkages?
- Are we remaining attentive to complex system dynamics? (E.g. emergent and unanticipated outcomes, trade-offs, spillover effects, synergies, feedbacks, rebound effects, lock-ins, tipping points…)
- Are we considering outcomes across and between social, ecological and economic domains?
- Are we thinking about flows, dynamics and relationships as well as structures and more discrete things?

TOOLS

- There are many different frameworks and perspectives related to systems thinking and complexity science – including diverse Indigenous relational worldviews, complexity theory, living system theory, critical systems heuristics, socio-technical systems theory, complex adaptive systems[30], agent-based modelling, value-creating systems[31], actor-network theory, structuration theory[32], and the Cynefin Framework.
- Many other frameworks have been developed for particular sectors – such as the food system flower for food systems.
- Numerous overarching evaluation approaches are based on complexity and systems thinking principles, including Blue Marble Evaluation, Developmental Evaluation, Footprint Evaluation, diverse Indigenous Evaluation approaches, and the African Evaluation Principles.
- Realist Evaluation unpacks the mechanisms behind expected or observed impacts.
- Visualise and explore complex systems and relationships with tools such as causal loop diagrams, Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis, social network analysis, the World Mandala, Digital Twins, and digital bioregional story maps.
- Outcome Mapping or Ripple Effect Mapping can help to capture observed outcomes (both positive and negative) of system interventions regardless of whether they were expected.
- Three Horizons can help evaluation users to unpack and navigate complexity.
- Use holistic indicators and indicator frameworks that assess the multiple dimensions of sustainability in an integrated rather than siloed way – such as the TEEBAgriFood Evaluation Framework or The Food Systems Countdown Initiative in food system contexts.



2. Context Principle

The Context Principle encourages you to treat what you're evaluating as unique and in need of context-adapted evaluation. No two transformation contexts are the same, and an evaluation approach in one context may be inappropriate or ineffective in another. This principle is in contrast to assumptions of replicability and standardisation that still characterise many conventional evaluations.

While specific interventions, methods and indicators need to be contextualised, some things – including principles, theories of how change works, ethical and relational commitments, and the conditions that allow particular mechanisms of change to be initiated – can potentially travel between contexts, and are important for cumulative learning across contexts. Evaluation then plays a role in helping such ideas travel well (as described in the Partnerships Principle), and avoiding excessive contextualisation – where every situation is treated as so unique that no learning can be shared.

QUESTIONS

- Are we honouring the uniqueness of this context?
- Are we adapting our approach appropriately to this context?
- What ideas, commitments and enabling conditions can and should travel between contexts?

TOOLS

- Putting the Context Principle into practice requires awareness of the many tools outlined under the other principles, and collaboratively developing *criteria* and indicators tailored to particular places to make them meaningful and culturally appropriate.
- One of the operating principles of Blue Marble Evaluation is 'bricolage': the creative combination and adaptation of an array of different tools, given that any one tool will rarely be sufficient or universally applicable in particular contexts.
- Regenerative Evaluation explicitly rejects 'copy-paste' solutions in favour of context-specific, lived experience and honouring the uniqueness of place.
- Various methods could help you to deepen understanding of specific contexts, including examination of publicly available data (e.g. demographics), media and social media analysis, interviews of people with long-term experience, and design labs.
- Building on an *evaluand*'s existing strengths and what people are already motivated to protect and improve – using approaches including asset-based community development, appreciative inquiry and positive psychology – could be more effective than problem-focused approaches.



3. Detective Principle

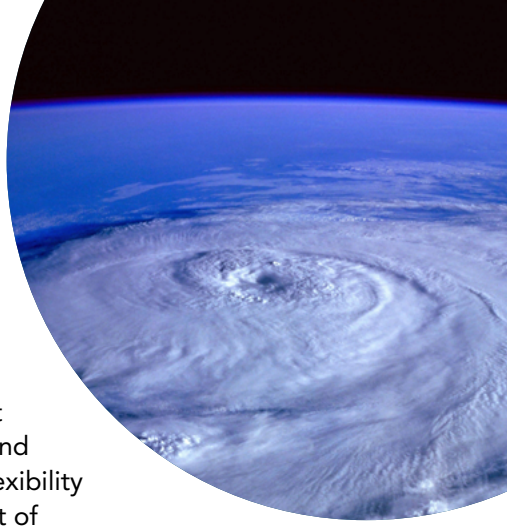
The Detective Principle encourages you to be a mixed-methods detective, drawing on diverse tools and perspectives to make sense of changes that you're seeing in contexts of transformation. This principle is important because there are many equally valid ways of knowing reality, clear-cut conclusions about causality are rarely possible in complex system transformation, and most large-scale change is outside the control of individual initiatives – so multiple influencing factors need to be taken into account. This is in contrast to evaluations that focus on relatively narrow forms of evidence (particularly quantitative data) and assume linear chains of causality in theories of change.

QUESTIONS

- How can we gain a richer understanding of what's going on?
- Do we have a sufficient balance of quantitative and qualitative methods?
- Are we obtaining a sufficient diversity of perspectives and integrating them appropriately?
- What patterns and trends are we noticing in our system of interest?
- What mechanisms underlie the change we're seeing?
- What contributions are we making to change, in light of many other influences?

TOOLS

- The key thing for applying this principle is to draw on a range of different methods and perspectives in data collection and analysis. Consider qualitative as well as quantitative data. You could use interviews, surveys and focus groups alongside quantitative indicator monitoring and scenario modelling, for instance.
- *Etuaptmumk* or Two-Eyed Seeing – introduced by Mi'kmaq Elders Albert D. Marshall and Murdena Marshall from Eskasoni First Nation alongside Canadian biologist Cheryl Bartlett – brings Indigenous and *Western* knowledge systems into respectful relation: seeing with the strengths of each and using both together, while avoiding the reduction, assimilation, or merging of Indigenous knowledge into Western frameworks[33].
- Sentinel Indicators is a method of selecting critical indicators of system health that could highlight where further investigation and action is needed.
- Make sense of system changes and contributions to change using thematic analysis and tools such as SenseMaker, based on the Cynefin Framework from management science – which helps to obtain micro-narratives from the system context, drawn from people's experiences, reflections, perceptions and attitudes, and make sense of emergent patterns from those narratives – and Most Significant Change.
- Recent advances in Artificial Intelligence, Big Data and Digital Twins could enrich system understanding, although remain wary of environmental footprint and ethical implications.
- Use tools such as process tracing and contribution analysis to deduce an initiative's relative contribution to observed outcomes, and update theories of change and transformation.



4. Developmental Principle

The Developmental Principle encourages you to remain agile, adaptive and developmental in response to the dynamic conditions in transformation contexts. Complex systems are never static, and much of their behaviour is beyond our control; today's objectives may be irrelevant tomorrow. So evaluation must not only aid navigation of new challenges and opportunities as they arise, but also build initiatives' wider capacity and flexibility to experiment, adapt and evolve. This is in contrast to the common format of evaluation exercises being applied at just one or two discrete predetermined points during a project (e.g. *formative* and *summative evaluation*); the Developmental Principle instead advocates for more continuous evaluation that is applied as and when needs arise.

QUESTIONS

- Is our frequency of feedback sufficient to match the speed of change in our system?
- What outcomes and ripple effects of our work are already evident?
- Are we still doing relevant things?
- Are we building on strengths?
- Are we thinking sufficiently about the long term?

TOOLS

- Overarching evaluation approaches including Developmental Evaluation, Blue Marble Evaluation, Reflexive Monitoring in Action[34], Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation and Real-time Evaluation strongly embody the Developmental Principle.
- Use tools such as Outcome Mapping, Ripple Effect Mapping, snapshot surveys, Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP), Most Significant Change and Williams' pattern-spotting framework to rapidly capture and make sense of emergent outcomes and impacts, and test elements of theory of change hypotheses.
- Rapid cycle testing and rapid evaluation methods more generally provide structured ways of conducting evaluations and when time and resources are constrained.
- Advances in Artificial Intelligence and Big Data could aid more rapid and timely evaluations, although remain wary of environmental footprint and ethical implications.
- Principles can be helpful 'anchors' to guide action in dynamic and uncertain environments. Evaluation of the effectiveness of principles and fidelity to them is the remit of Principles-focused Evaluation. The GUIDE framework offers recommendations for formulating high-quality principles that are Guiding, Useful, Inspiring, Developmental and Evaluable.
- Apply a 'learning by doing' approach by using pilots, living labs and hackathons to encourage well-informed experimentation — building on what we know and can derive from both theory and practice.



5. Foresight Principle

The Foresight Principle encourages you to use foresight methods (e.g. horizon scanning, scenario planning, forecasts and pathways practices) alongside evidence from the past and present, with an eye on long-term, mid-term and short-term futures. Restricting evaluation to retrospective evidence has been likened to driving forwards whilst looking in the rearview mirror[35], and risks system change efforts being continually caught out by changing contexts, and failing to sustain desirable outcomes. An orientation towards radically different and *regenerative futures* is also important for establishing a fundamental contrast to current systems, and therefore encouraging more transformative action in the present.

QUESTIONS

- What are our desired futures?
- How can we push the ambition and imagination of our desired futures?
- How might things play out in the future, given current trends and megatrends?
- How future-proof are we?

TOOLS

- Future-sensitivity is embedded in a number of overarching evaluation approaches, including Blue Marble Evaluation, Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation, Reflexive Monitoring in Action[34], Sitra's Evaluation Framework, and Visionary Evaluation[36].
- Three Horizons is a simple but powerful framework for collectively envisioning transformed futures and exploring their contrast to current systems. It has been used in a sophisticated way by the International Evaluation Academy, for instance, to determine how the field of evaluation should transform to help address the polycrisis (see case studies in Section 5).
- To structure the creative exploration and interrogation of desired or possible futures, methods include horizon-scanning to identify trends likely to influence future actions, scenario building, Delphi analysis, backcasting (working backwards from an envisioned future to understand the necessary intermediate actions), wind-tunneling (testing how existing strategies would fare in different futures), and methods for describing the future as if it exists today (e.g. imagining future newspaper headlines).
- There are many other helpful futures methods and frameworks, including Seeds of Good Anthropocenes, Theory U, anticipatory action learning, ParEvo, Causal Layered Analysis, Futures Wheel, Futures Cone, and the Haudenosaunee Seventh Generation principle. Further examples can be found on BetterEvaluation's foresight evaluation page.



POWER PRINCIPLES

6. Justice Principle

The Justice Principle encourages you to promote justice and decolonisation, and honour diverse and often marginalised voices and ways of knowing and being. This activist stance is a fundamental shift from the more neutral, independent positions traditionally adopted by many evaluators. Conventional evaluation can also perpetuate colonial legacies where *Western* perspectives are imposed on other contexts, with minimal involvement of affected populations in shaping the evaluation. The Justice Principle is important in transformation contexts because it means that evaluation actively embodies and tries to shift problematic power structures that constrain transformation.

QUESTIONS

- Are we challenging problematic power structures?
- Are we being culturally sensitive and responsive?
- Are we upholding the voices and rights of marginalised and colonised groups, including Indigenous and *Global South* societies?
- Are we imposing particular worldviews?
- Are we honouring diverse ways of knowing? (E.g. more embodied, tacit, practical and intuitive knowledge as well as rational and intellectual)

TOOLS

- Donna Mertens' Transformative Evaluation approach has an explicit focus on promoting social justice, challenging power hierarchies in society and working in an inclusive and empowering way with minority and marginalised communities. The Prague Declaration (Box 4), Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Equitable Evaluation Framework™ adopt similar stances.
- Indigenous Evaluation approaches such as Kaupapa Māori Evaluation and the Nation-to-Nation (N2N) Systems Evaluation Framework[37] focus on elevating and empowering the knowledge and cultures of Indigenous peoples and First/Tribal Nations.
- Feminist Evaluation and Inclusive Systemic Evaluation for Gender equality, Environments and Marginalised voices (ISE4GEMs) focus on advancing gender-based justice, while LGBTQ+ Evaluation[38] promotes LGBTQ+ inclusion and liberation.
- Made in Africa Evaluation aims to decolonise evaluation in Africa and support locally developed African evaluation approaches that promote African livelihoods and values. The African Evaluation Principles similarly call on evaluations to empower Africans, address inequalities and power asymmetries, and embrace a diversity of perspectives particularly from the Global South and Indigenous cultures.
- South-South cooperation in development evaluations is advocated to resist the colonial dominance of Global North evaluation approaches in the Global South (better known as international development cooperation or development aid)[39]. Cooperation between countries in the Global South is an increasingly powerful force in international development but under-appreciated and overshadowed by the frameworks, narratives, and approaches of North-South cooperation[39].



7. Power Shift Principle

The Power Shift Principle encourages you to facilitate rather than direct as an evaluator, and shift power to the users of evaluations. Conventionally, evaluators have been positioned as directive experts from outside the context of interest – but the experts are typically the local people who are most directly involved in transformation efforts and impacted by them. In many Indigenous, African and Asian traditions, the separation between evaluator and *evaluand* has never been as sharp as in conventional evaluations of *Western* origin, so the practices that this principle calls for are long-established.

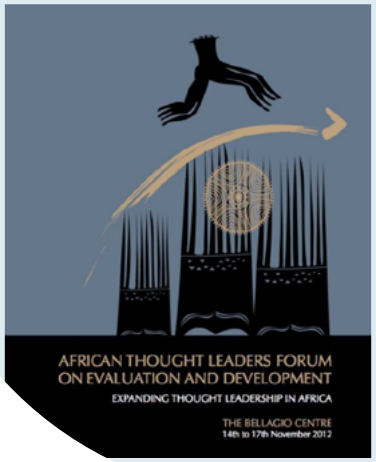
Like the Justice Principle, the Power Shift Principle helps evaluation to actively embody the power shifts sought in wider system change. Shifting power to evaluation users also increases the likelihood that TFE will become embedded in the working culture of organisations and initiatives, even after initial evaluation facilitators move on.

QUESTIONS

- Who are the primary intended users of this evaluation?
- Are we being sufficiently focused on the utilisation of our evaluation and its findings, and genuinely meeting users' needs?
- Are we empowering evaluation users?
- Are we building capacity for transformation, regenerative practice, and transformation-focused evaluation?

TOOLS

- Many overarching evaluation approaches are built around greater participation and empowerment, including Deliberative Democratic Evaluation, Design-driven Evaluation[40], Developmental Evaluation, Participatory Evaluation, and Reflexive Monitoring in Action[34], as well as approaches listed under the Justice Principle.
- Empowerment Evaluation aims to enhance communities' capacity to self-evaluate.
- Utilisation-focused Evaluation works with evaluation users in participatory ways that foster a sense of ownership by the users as they shape the evaluation approach.
- Participatory action research is often an appropriate method or framing for participatory evaluations.
- Some analysis methods lend themselves well to dialogic and participatory contexts, such as Most Significant Change.



8. Autonomous Evaluation Principle

The Autonomous Evaluation Principle encourages you to stand by your ethical stance and speak truth to power, particularly to the people and organisations that commission and fund evaluations. It calls for stronger professionalisation and autonomy of evaluation practice from vested interests in the unsustainable status quo. This is important to avoid perpetuating greenwashing, transformation-washing (Box 8), and other misleading evaluation practices that distract from failures to change systems in more fundamental ways. It is uncommon in conventional evaluation practice for evaluators to call out such practice, or even refuse to accept evaluation commissions that constrain honest critique.

Different evaluation traditions embed this sense of autonomy differently. *Western*-derived evaluation typically locates it in professional standing and individual ethical commitment; Indigenous, African and Asian traditions more often ground it in relational accountability to community, ancestors and future generations. Both routes lead to the same essential refusal to be captured by vested interests.

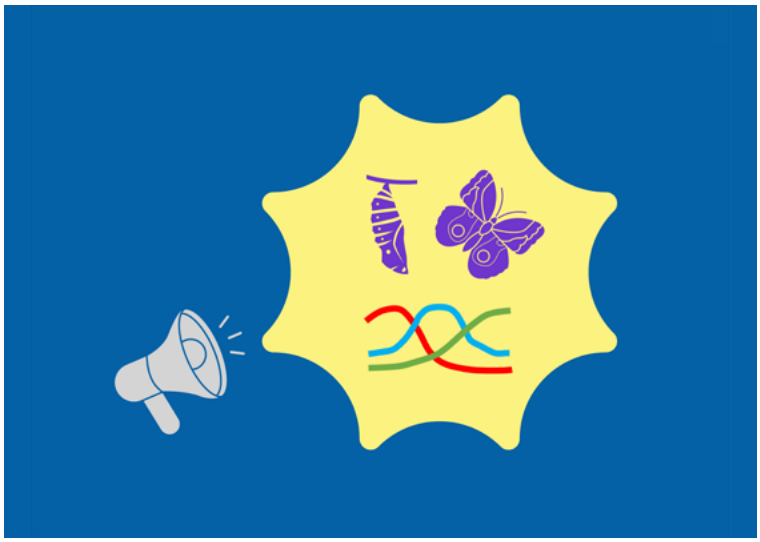
QUESTIONS

- Are the funders/commissioners of this work genuinely focused on transformation and regeneration?
- Are we legitimising the unsustainable status quo?
- Have we been given a genuine platform to speak truth to power?
- Do we understand and take account of all the dimensions of power at play in how this evaluation has been set up?

TOOLS

- The Prague Declaration (Box 4) emphasises the collective action needed from evaluators to develop features of professionalism, including 'an ethical charter, expert knowledge, proven competencies and self-management'[41].
- The African Evaluation Principles urge evaluators to guard against vested interests.
- The powercube is a helpful framework for highlighting the levels, spaces and forms of power and their interrelationships, including relatively hidden or invisible forms of power.

Box 8: Transformation fidelity and transformation-washing



One of the clearest ways in which evaluation can support transformation efforts is by helping to tell the difference between genuine transformation fidelity and transformation-washing.

Transformation-washing is the use of transformation language to describe activity that does not, in fact, alter the structures, power relations, or paradigms keeping current systems in place. Like greenwashing, it absorbs critique while preserving the status quo. It is increasingly common, partly because transformation language is increasingly welcomed in funding circles and corporate communications, and partly because genuinely transformational work is hard to commission, evidence and reward.

Transformation fidelity is the degree to which an initiative's stated transformational intent is borne out in its design, practice, relationships and effects. TFE's Transformation Principle urges evaluators to assess fidelity rather than rhetoric, while the Autonomous Evaluation Principle asks them to be in a position to say so plainly when fidelity is weak.

While questions like 'Is rhetoric about transformation and regeneration being substantiated by action?' can be helpful in uncovering transformation-washing, additional questions will help delve deeper. For example, does the initiative engage with deeper causes of systemic problems, or only with symptoms? Whose understanding of transformation is being used, and is it shared by those most affected by the transformation effort?

Independent or *external evaluation* is often well placed to ask these questions, because it holds the rhetoric and the practice at arm's length. This is one of the contexts in which TFE's Power Shift Principle and Autonomous Evaluation Principle can be in tension.



9. Partnerships Principle

The Partnerships Principle encourages you to foster cross-boundary partnerships and focus on the alignment of different transformation efforts. Such efforts have a greater chance of success if they coordinate and synergise with like-minded initiatives, and engage actors from across multiple sectors and cultures. Formal collaboration is not essential, and more informal kinds of alignment can also be powerful. This partnership mentality can also be embodied in diverse, multi- and transdisciplinary evaluation teams – giving further strength to the Detective, Justice and Power Shift Principles.

An important aspect of this principle is the need for transparent sharing of findings and learning between different evaluations. Evaluation data are often considered proprietary, resulting in inadequate sharing across the field and consequently a lack of coordination and integration. With that said, evaluators should respect protocols of knowledge-sharing in particular communities (e.g. the Protocols for Non-Indigenous People Working with Indigenous Knowledge developed by Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab and colleagues).

QUESTIONS

- How strong is our partnership?
- Is our partnership sufficiently diverse?
- Are we fostering mutualistic partnerships of knowledge-sharing and action?
- How can we effectively influence and accessibly share our progress, impacts and learning with others?
- Are we being respectful in how we share knowledge?
- How effectively are we aligning with other transformation and regeneration efforts?

TOOLS

- Many of the evaluation approaches that promote decolonisation, justice, and genuine participation (see Justice and Power Shift Principles), such as Transformative Evaluation, focus on building trusting partnerships with evaluation users.
- Social network analysis can help to determine the type and quality of the collaborations at play, while agent-based modelling could be used to explore how collectives of actors influence system behaviour.
- Tim Strasser's SCALE-3D framework illustrates how networks of initiatives could increase their potential for systemic impact through three dimensions of scaling: widening influence across diverse people, places and contexts, building capacity for lengthening and sustaining impacts through time, and deepening the structural and cultural embeddedness of new ways of being and working.
- The Yin Yang Principle of Blue Marble Evaluation encourages engagement with different perspectives, harmonising conceptual polarities and divisions, and transcending boundaries.
- The African Evaluation Principles focus on developing relationships of reciprocity and mutual accountability.
- The Prague Declaration (Box 4) emphasises the importance of mutualistic partnerships.
- Utilisation-focused Evaluation makes a point of encouraging wider dissemination of significant evaluation findings to expand influence.



10. Values Principle

The Values Principle encourages you to 'put the value back into evaluation' by surfacing, questioning and upholding *values*. There remains a deeply ingrained view in *Western*-derived evaluation practice that values should be kept out of the picture in favour of more objective, quantitative methods and evidence. TFE recognises that no evaluation practice is ever value-neutral, and that engaging with values provides a much richer understanding of particular contexts of transformation, the deeper underlying drivers of current crises, and whether desirable transformations are occurring. Indeed, shifts in people's values and beliefs can be powerful indicators that more fundamental system change is taking place. The Values Principle also calls on evaluators to uphold the values inherent in TFE – including a disposition towards advancing justice, decolonisation, power shifts towards evaluation users, transformation, and regenerative dynamics – while remaining reflexive about how their values are shaping their evaluation.

QUESTIONS

- What are the underlying values and assumptions at play, and where do they reveal tensions?
- What values do we want – and need – to uphold?
- Are our assumptions helpful and accurate?
- Are we upholding transformation- and regeneration-focused values?

TOOLS

- Indigenous Evaluation approaches such as Kaupapa Māori Evaluation typically centre cultural values as a primary focus.
- Numerous other evaluation approaches have an explicit focus on surfacing and reflexivity around people's values, including Deliberative Democratic Evaluation, Developmental Evaluation, Made in Africa Evaluation, Principles-focused Evaluation, Transformative Evaluation, and Visionary Evaluation[36].
- Regenerative Evaluation explicitly centres love as a force for transformation, recognising that the impulse to care for life lies at the root of all regeneration, and shifting views of evaluation from a transaction to an act of deep care.
- In Reflexive Monitoring in Action[34], evaluators act as 'sparring partners' who continuously encourage innovation teams and networks to challenge underlying assumptions and systemic patterns in designing and managing transition initiatives[42].
- Empowerment Evaluation and Feminist Evaluation encourage critical thinking about power relations and prescribed roles.
- Other tools and methods that help to elicit values include Three Horizons (guiding participants to imagine radically different desired futures and explore the contrasting values underpinning them), Causal Layered Analysis, Theory U, Four Levels of Conversation, and Most Significant Change.



11. Learning Principle

The Learning Principle encourages you to develop evaluation cultures centred around ongoing experimentation, humility, and learning. This principle might sound truistic, but evaluations are often driven by accountability to financiers and those in positions to punish non-compliance. While such forms of accountability are important, they often create a culture where failure is feared, value for money and legal compliance become a blind focus, and opportunities for more useful learning about supporting transformation are missed. TFE operates on the assumption that everyone in system change efforts are involved in some way or other in evaluation practice – emphasising the importance of developing cultures of working where reflexivity, deliberation and experiential learning are normalised.

QUESTIONS

- Are we remaining accountable for learning as well as successful transformation?
- Can we see 'failures' as opportunities for learning?
- Are we creating a wider culture of transformation-focused evaluation and learning?
- Are we enabling deeper forms of learning and reflexivity about our underlying assumptions?
- What are we learning about how to learn?

TOOLS

- The single-, double- and triple-loop learning framework[43] can help to distinguish between different depths of learning, including deeper transformative learning that challenges underlying assumptions, values, beliefs and paradigms, and how people see themselves in the world. Transformative Evaluation similarly draws on transformative learning theory, while Reflexive Monitoring in Action[34] incorporates ideas about 'system learning' – where systems' underlying structures, power relations and paradigms are challenged.
- *La sistematización de experiencias* is centred around learning from and with practice, generating cumulative knowledge through critical reflection rather than through extraction[28].
- In Freirean pedagogy, students 'learn by doing' and become empowered, reflective citizens, rather than unquestioningly absorbing information delivered didactically. Empowerment Evaluation aligns with Freirean principles.
- Generative learning theory describes how learning is based on integration of new and pre-existing knowledge in creative ways.
- In futures research, anticipatory action learning is used to reflexively interrogate possible and desired futures and how they could be brought about.
- Many other overarching evaluation approaches assimilate similar ideas about learning, including Blue Marble Evaluation, Design-driven Evaluation[40], Developmental Evaluation, Participatory Evaluation, and Real-time Evaluation.
- Interviews and focus groups are important data collection methods for enabling reflection.
- Failure Reports and Intelligent Failure Learning Loops are structured processes to encourage admission and understanding of 'failures' in interventions and learn from them.
- Council is an ancient and powerful practice for collective learning. It has many different forms and lineages. See for instance the work and resources of Rob Dreaming and Ojai Foundation (Ways of Council), Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle's book *The Way of Council*[44], the European Council Network, and the Wheel of Wisdom.



12. Transformation Principle

The Transformation Principle encourages you to focus on evaluating and supporting *transformations* towards *regenerative futures*: the fundamental purpose of your evaluation. To date, evaluations have typically informed 'change to keep things the same': relatively superficial and marginal improvements to existing systems that fail to shift the underlying structures and dynamics keeping problematic patterns in place. In contrast, supporting desirable transformations is TFE's *raison d'être* – with what counts as a desirable transformation being a key value judgement, reflection of power, and point of debate to surface. A regenerative orientation for transformation is used to seek and encourage dynamics where human health and wider ecological health become mutually reinforcing (Box 3), in contrast to the deeply degenerative and extractive dynamics underpinning industrialised capitalist societies.

QUESTIONS

- Is transformational and regenerative intent being maintained?
- Is rhetoric about transformation and regeneration being substantiated by action? (See Box 8)
- Are desirable transformations occurring?
- Is there evidence of regenerative dynamics?
- Is our action sufficiently reflecting the urgency of the need to transform towards regenerative futures?
- How are we contributing to transformation or regeneration?
- Are we regenerative?
- How can we embody transformation and regeneration in our ways of working?

TOOLS

- The conceptual frameworks for transformation in Box 2 (and associated methods of convening conversations about transformational versus reformist change, and envisioning desired futures) are relevant to this principle. The many other examples include Donella Meadows' leverage points and the related Intervention Level Framework, Five Dimensions of Transformational Change, Powers of 10, transformative outcomes of experimental policy engagements[45], and the Six Conditions of Systems Change of John Kania and colleagues.
- Numerous overarching evaluation approaches explicitly support transformational change as an ethical imperative for human and planetary health. These include Blue Marble Evaluation, Feminist Evaluation, Footprint Evaluation, Transformative Evaluation, Visionary Evaluation, Transformative Empowerment Evaluation, the African Evaluation Principles, the Prague Declaration and Earth Day Evaluation Declaration (Box 4), and Astrid Brousselle's work on evaluation for planetary health.

- Many other evaluation approaches and frameworks, while not necessarily taking such a strong ethical stance, nonetheless focus on assessing transformational, systemic change. These include: the system change evaluation frameworks of Per Mickwitz and colleagues[46], Mark Cabaj[47], Margaret Hargreaves[48], and Nancy Latham[49]; the Orders of Outcomes framework[50]; and both criteria[24] and principles for evaluating transformation developed by Michael Quinn Patton and Weronika Felcis.
- The Systems Change Evaluation Canvas can aid reflection when designing a systems change evaluation.
- The Signals of Transformational Change framework[51,52] – developed by the Climate Investment Funds' Transformational Change Learning Partnership – makes an important shift from only tracking limited, specific quantitative metrics and indicators to tracking broader signals of systemic shifts at different stages of progress.
- Various disciplines, frameworks and tools exist for focusing evaluation on regenerative systems, dynamics and futures (many of which are highlighted by Regenerative Evaluation). Fields such as regenerative design, regenerative development and regenerative sustainability, as well as many Indigenous frameworks and philosophies, already embrace many TFE principles, including consideration of change as more unpredictable and emergent, honouring unique locales, embracing reflexivity and co-creation, and seeing *evaluands* as part of a wider social-ecological system.
- Evaluative frameworks such as the Inner Development Goals, Regenerative Development Goals, Regenerative Development Evaluation Tool[53], Regenerative Lens[19], Biomimicry DesignLens, Permaculture Design Principles, Ecovillage Map of Regeneration, and Commonland's 4 Returns Framework, draw attention to regenerative qualities and dynamics, and the interdependence of inner and outer transformation.
- While the influential Sustainable Development Goals provide an ambitious orientation for transformations, their actual transformative or regenerative potential is contested (Box 9).
- Tools that encourage ambition, imagination and regenerative alignment in exercises of envisioning desired and possible futures include the Regenerative Lens[19], Seeds of Good Anthropocenes, and many other tools in Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Collective Imagination Practices Toolkit.
- Many other evaluative tools for regenerative practice are described in our two separate guides, *Tools for regenerative practice: 30 frameworks, exercises and methods in service of human and planetary flourishing*, and *An introduction to regenerative dynamics*.

Box 9: The Sustainable Development Goals – a transformational orientation for evaluation or perpetuation of the status quo?



The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were signed unanimously by all 193 member states of the United Nations in 2015, and effectively replaced the previous Millennium Development Goals. These nations committed to achieving all the SDGs by 2030. The SDGs have since become a highly influential orientation for sustainability and justice across the world. They are laudably ambitious, advocate transformation across social, economic and ecological domains, and consider sustainable development in a reasonably holistic way.

Some of the goals (particularly SDG 8, 'Decent work and economic growth') have been criticised, however, as perpetuating problematic notions of GDP-based material economic growth. This has led some to call the SDGs a neoliberal 'Trojan horse'[54] that prioritises globalised market-led growth over genuine local economic sovereignty[55], and fails to address the incompatibility of GDP-based growth with environmental sustainability goals (e.g. SDGs 13, 14 and 15)[56].

The SDGs have also been criticised as universalist, oversimplifying, and imposing *Western* values[57,58] – exacerbated by the fact that research on the SDGs is dominated by analysts from the *Global North*[59]. The goals are seen to treat sustainable development as more of a technical issue than a political one, and ignore the colonial roots of development problems[55]. Some even see 'sustainability' itself as an insufficient framing, with a *regenerative* orientation necessary to reverse the harm that humans have already caused[60–62] (see Box 3). These critiques have helped to stimulate creation of the Inner Development Goals and Regenerative Development Goals that extend the SDGs.

Perhaps most importantly, the SDGs are failing in their primary mission to stimulate sustainable development. Most of the goals remain distant prospects[63–65]. The SDGs have mostly had symbolic uptake and shaped discourse rather than actually being translated into action – due particularly to their lack of strong legal accountability[66].

Overall, the SDGs are a mixed bag that set high ambitions while perpetuating problematic power relations. They are nonetheless important leverage points for encouraging action towards sustainability – such multilateral agreement on a shared global direction is rare. Transformation-focused evaluators will likely have to engage with the SDGs. What would TFE suggest about the most effective way of doing so?

TFE's Complex Systems Principle would encourage evaluators to take a complexity-informed view of the SDGs, investigating their synergies and trade-offs rather than treating them as silos[67,68]. Crucially, TFE's Context, Justice, Power Shift and Value Principles would urge evaluators to avoid imposing the SDGs without considering their appropriateness in particular contexts, ensure that local stakeholders and priorities strongly shape SDG adaptation and evaluation, and surface underlying values and tensions at play – including legacies of colonialism.

The twelve principles as a whole

The twelve principles for TFE outlined above are far from straightforward to implement. They are to be applied as an integrated set, not selected on a whim as from an *à la carte* menu. Helpfully, many of the principles complement and reinforce each other (Figure 7). For example, openness to more diverse perspectives (as described in the Detective and Justice Principles) will likely enhance cultures of learning (as described in the Learning Principle).

Tensions also exist between some of the principles, however (Figure 7). In particular, more *independent* or *external evaluations* might be important in some contexts to hold organisations more strongly to account or provide wider perspectives, where there would otherwise be a high risk of bias, cherry-picking and greenwashing (as per the Autonomous Evaluation Principle), or an evaluand would otherwise struggle to step back and observe itself holistically – creating tensions with the Power Shift Principle that aims to empower continuous, transformation-focused self-evaluation. Equally, the Autonomous Evaluation Principle could clash with the Justice Principle if external evaluations reinforce colonial issues, such as the *Global North* evaluating the *Global South*. Another tension lies between recognising how uncontrollable many complex systems are (Developmental Principle), whilst also maintaining a responsibility to continue striving to support desirable transformations.

Such tensions can encourage some of the most insightful points of nuance, learning, and resolution between principles. For example, more independent and external evaluations can to some extent still support shifts in power – but primarily through how data collection is carried out (e.g. learning from marginalised voices) and even simply in the way that it forces evaluated organisations to sit and think about the evaluation findings. As such, the Power Shift and Autonomous Evaluation Principles might find some common ground.

Overall, for an evaluation to be fully 'transformation-focused' as understood in this guide, we suggest that it must apply Principles 1-6 and 9-12, and apply the Power Shift Principle where this does not contradict the Autonomous Evaluation Principle.

A key skill in any transformation-focused evaluator is therefore building on the complementarities and navigating the tensions between the twelve principles, and remaining sensitive to what is appropriate to apply in a given context.

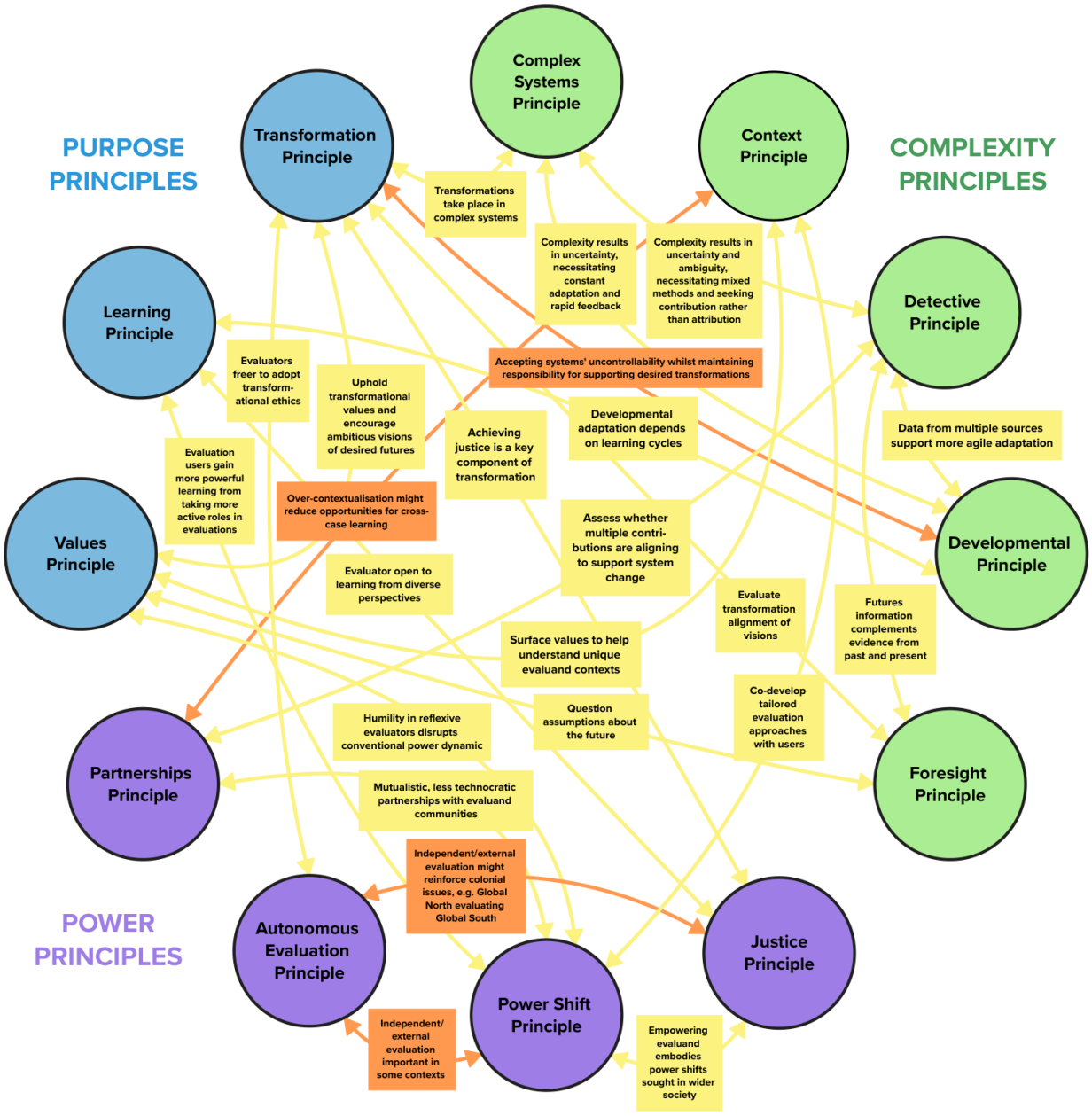
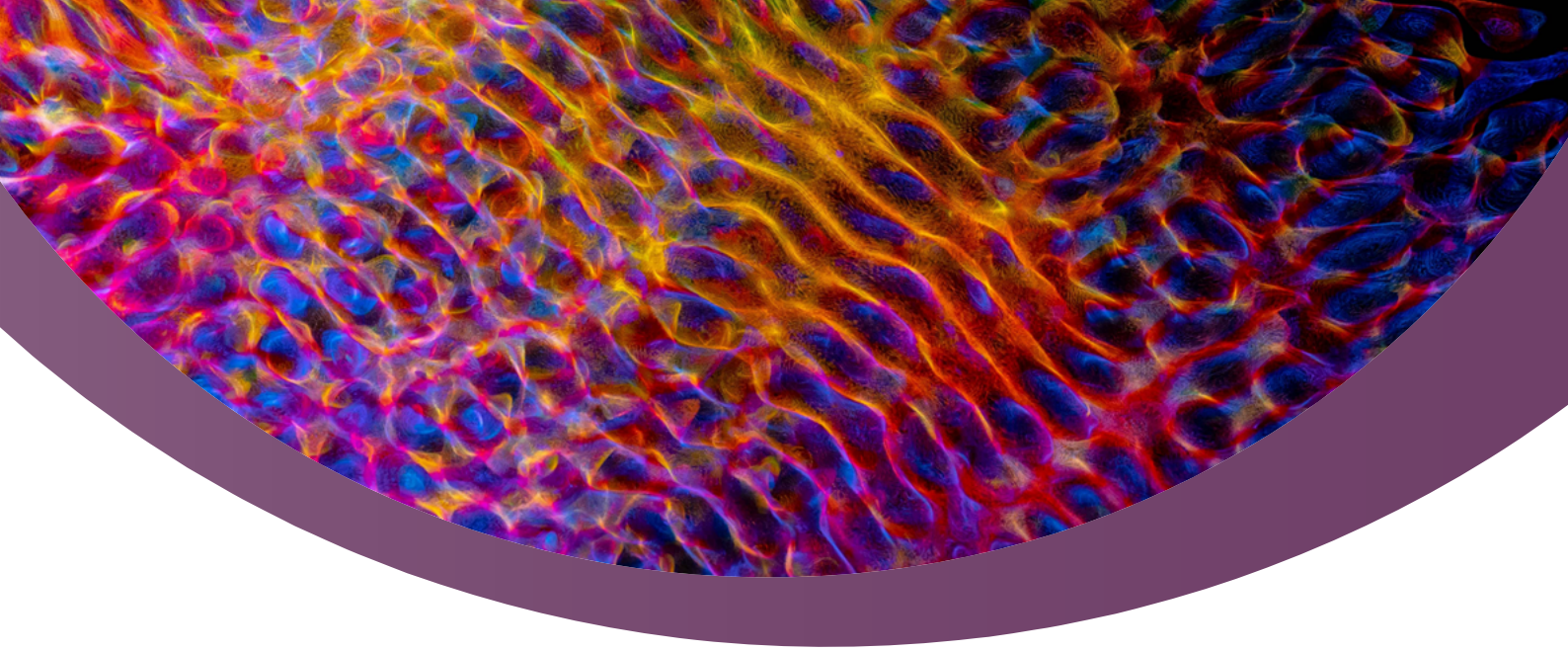


Figure 7. Examples of complementarities and tensions between the twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation. Diagram created by Sam Buckton in Mural (Tactivos, Inc. dba Mural), adapted from research by Sam Buckton and colleagues[26].

KEY POINTS ABOUT TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION

To summarise the key points from this Section:

- TFE can be defined as *evaluation practice that contributes to catalysing transformations towards regenerative futures*.
- TFE plays vital roles in maintaining transformational intent, enabling agility and rapid adaptation to dynamic conditions, making sense of complexity, encouraging reflexivity and deeper forms of learning, and ultimately enabling transformation efforts to take wiser and more effective action.
- TFE represents a fundamental shift from the limitations of conventional evaluation practice in multiple ways – including in its complexity awareness, power relations, and purpose. In its most radical sense, TFE takes a more active and normative role in seeking and encouraging desired transformations – not just providing passive support. TFE is also most often seen as a continuous *part* of change processes rather than removed from them.
- Many of the shifts TFE calls for – relational accountability, deep contextualisation, evaluation as part of community life, holding multiple knowledge systems together, and more – have been long-standing practice in non-Western traditions. Engaging with these traditions on their own terms is part of what TFE entails.
- The twelve principles of TFE contain many complementarities as well as some tensions. A key skill for transformation-focused evaluators is therefore building on complementarities and navigating tensions between the twelve principles, remaining sensitive to what is appropriate to apply in a given context.
- There is a diverse array of tools available for putting TFE into practice. TFE is more than just applying particular methods, however – it's about how methods are applied in service of a broader goal of catalysing desirable transformations.



SECTION 5: HOW CAN WE IMPLEMENT AND EMBED TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION?

The previous sections explained the meaning of evaluation, transformation, and transformation-focused evaluation (TFE) – as well as their vital importance in our crisis-hit world. You've now been introduced to some of the key shifts and principles that set TFE apart from conventional approaches, along with some helpful methods, frameworks and tools for operationalising TFE principles.

Awareness of TFE is just the first step, however. We also need to design, implement and ultimately embed TFE frameworks and approaches in the messiness of the real, transforming world. *Evaluands* for TFE are not just isolated projects, policies and programs, or purely state-led policymaking. New terms like *transformation catalysts* (Figure 8), *transformation systems* and *systemic investing* highlight how transformations are increasingly characterised by large-scale, system-wide, diverse partnerships and networks striving to coordinate and resource collective change. This brings wider initiatives, strategies, portfolios, communities, regions, sectors, and societies into view as contexts for TFE.

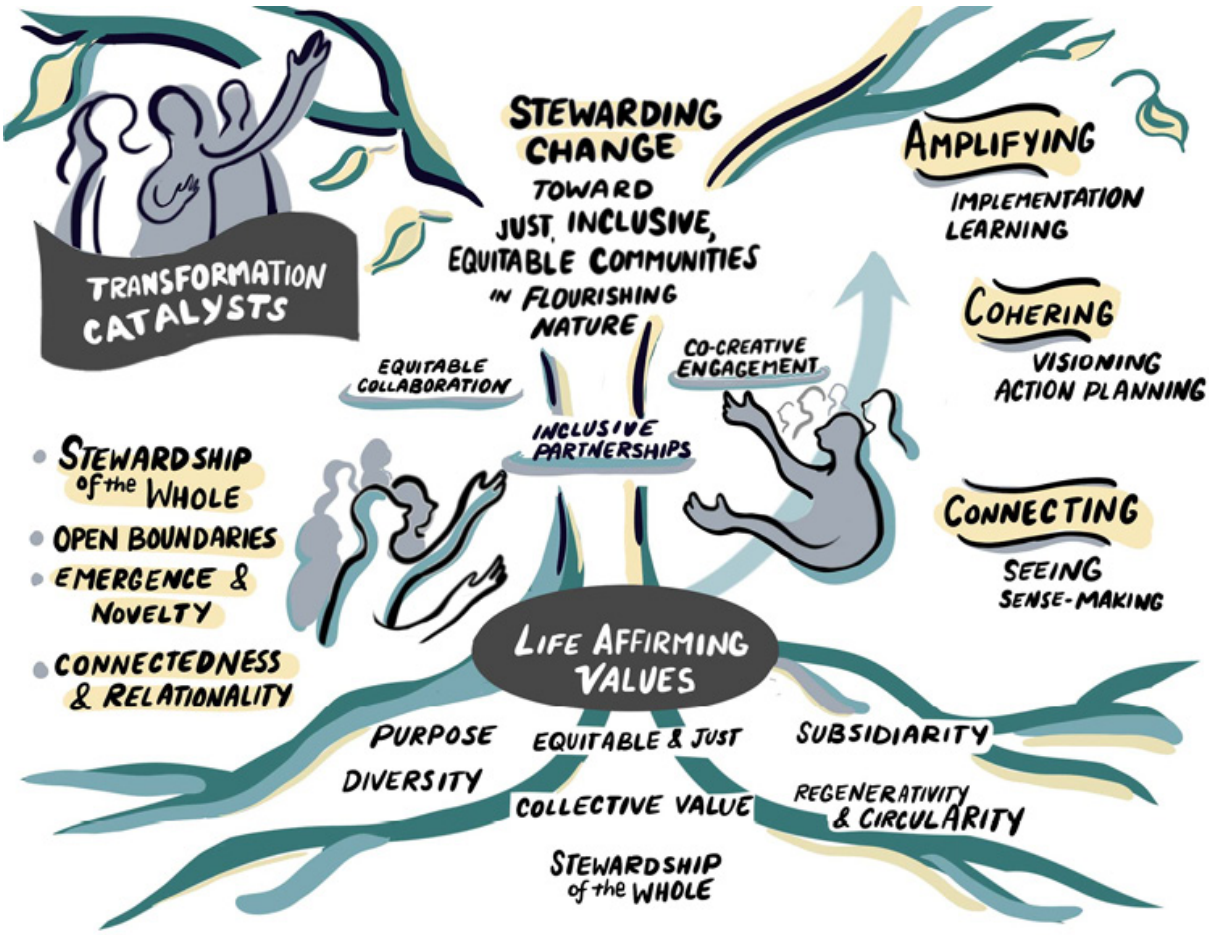


Figure 8. The role of transformation catalysts in system change. Artwork by Sandra Waddock[69].

Implementing and embedding TFE can be a major challenge, however, for multiple reasons:

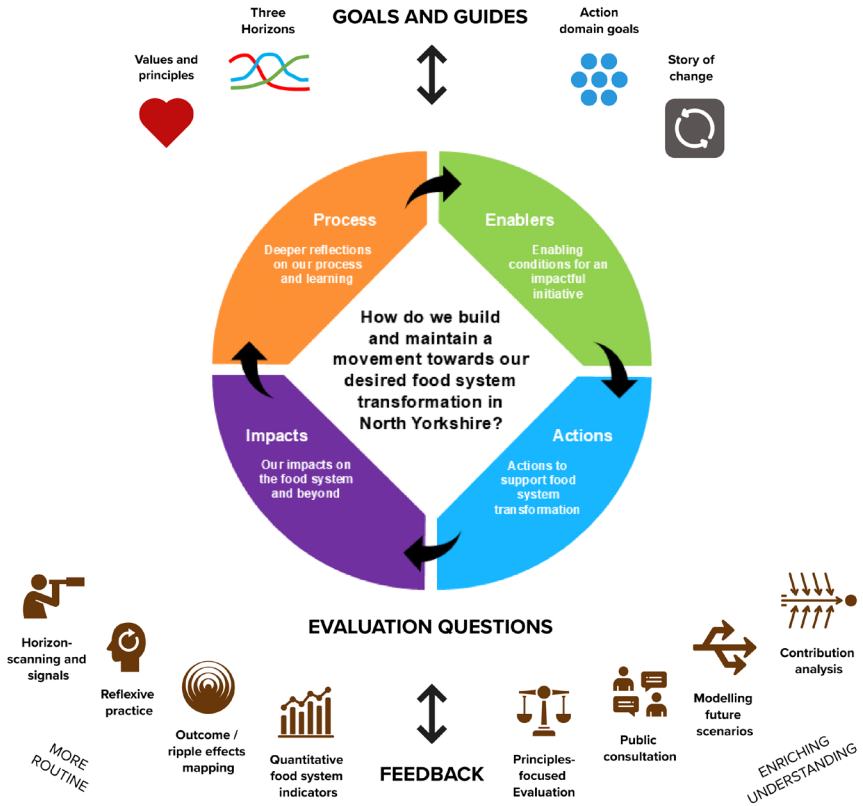
- Conventional evaluation approaches are often strongly institutionalised.
- TFE requires fundamental shifts in thinking and practice, which can take time – yet the transformational imperative calls for urgency and speed.
- Funding for evaluation globally has recently diminished following major cuts to international aid budgets.
- Even some of the most basic good practice in evaluation, including the evaluation of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) *criteria* by businesses and investors, has recently fallen by the wayside globally – driven particularly by the demonisation of such criteria by right-wing populist politicians. At the same time, transformation-washing is rife (Box 8).

It is imperative to increase experimentation with TFE practice, and to take risks to ensure evaluation's relevance for the future. This section therefore uses a set of twelve case studies to illustrate how different groups of actors have gone about designing, implementing and embedding TFE in contexts of supporting system change. Some key principles are then drawn out from these case studies. The section finishes by outlining some important next steps for advancing TFE.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies illustrate how TFE has been designed, implemented and embedded in various contexts of supporting system change around the world. They show TFE at different stages of maturity, and are not all examples of TFE applied at full strength. They are also not the result of systematic, formal meta-evaluation of how the principles in Section 4 have been applied. Their aim is more to give a rough flavour of what TFE principles might look like when put into practice in real-world settings.

1. Food for the Future North Yorkshire



What: a regional-scale food system transformation initiative, involving a cross-sector partnership currently coordinated by a local authority (North Yorkshire Council).

Where: North Yorkshire, England, UK.

Application of TFE: researchers from the FixOurFood programme worked with Food for the Future representatives to co-design a transformation-focused evaluation and learning framework for the initiative, inspired by the twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation[26] (amongst various other approaches).

The resulting framework shows how core evaluation questions, goals and guides, and different forms of feedback, sense-making and learning could be integrated and reinforce each other within an ecosystem of actors striving to support transformation towards a regenerative food system.

Building on the findings from a Three Horizons foresight process, the evaluation framework is actively being used to assess enabling conditions for an impactful initiative, prioritise transformative actions that the initiative resources, capture emergent outcomes, and reflect on the initiative's learning journey. There are also plans to apply contribution analysis to the initiative's story of change to understand the extent to which Food for the Future is contributing to more systemic change.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Detective, Foresight, Power Shift, Partnerships, Values, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: Food for the Future North Yorkshire Framework for Action[70]; journal article about the evaluation co-design[71]

2. Well-being of Future Generations (Welsh Government)



What: a national government embedding the wellbeing of future generations into policy evaluation across public organisations.

Where: Wales, UK.

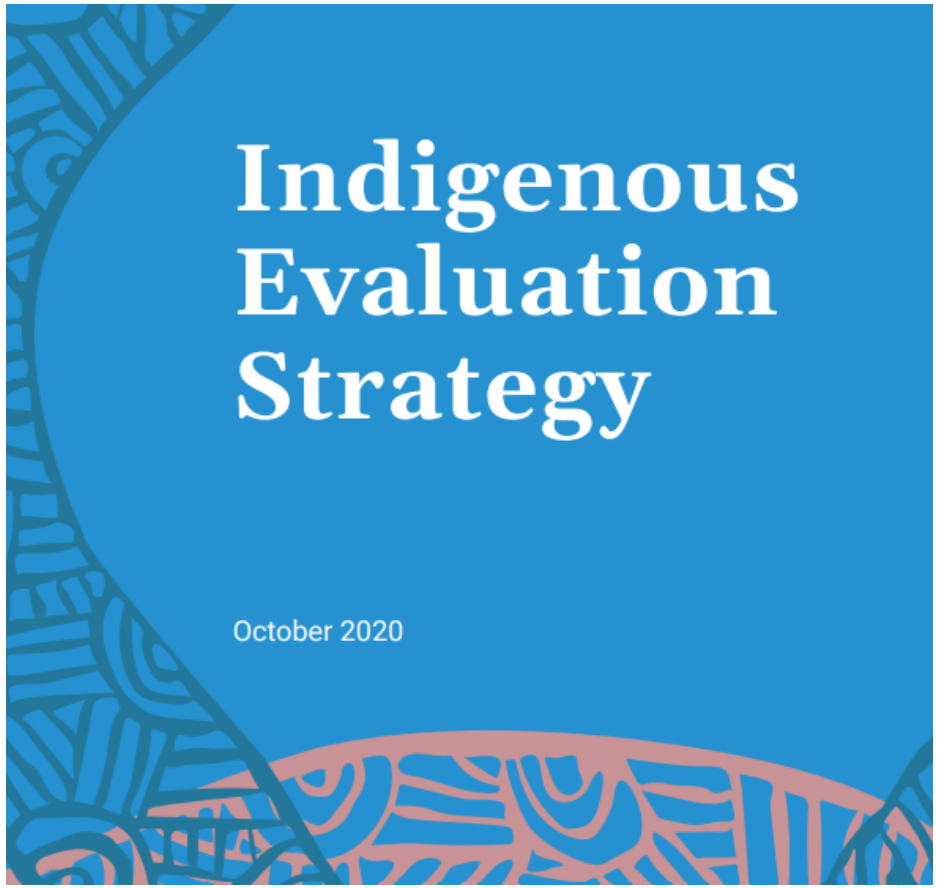
Application of TFE: under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, public bodies in Wales – including local authorities, health boards, national parks and others – must ensure that their activities preserve the wellbeing of future as well as current generations, and strive for Wales' Seven Well-being Goals that define a socially, culturally, economically and environmentally thriving Wales. Public bodies must also follow five 'ways of working' to achieve the Well-being Goals, including long-term thinking, integration between the Goals and other public bodies, involving a diversity of stakeholders, collaboration, and preventing problems from occurring or worsening.

This creates a very different culture to a conventional national focus on growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and embeds a much more holistic approach to economic and policy evaluation. A set of 50 indicators and periodic milestones are used to support evaluation of progress towards Wales' Well-being Goals, enforced by the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales and Auditor General for Wales. The Commissioner provides a wealth of resources supporting public bodies to embed wellbeing goals into their evaluation, including a Three Horizons toolkit to support transformation-focused, long-term strategic planning.

TFE principles emphasised: Context, Foresight, Justice, Partnerships, Transformation

Find out more: Future Generations Commissioner for Wales

3. Australian Government Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy



What: a national government strategy for Indigenous-centred evaluations of policies and programmes affecting Indigenous peoples.

Where: Australia.

Application of TFE: in 2020, the Australian Government formally adopted a whole-of-government Indigenous Evaluation Strategy for selecting, planning, conducting and using evaluations of policies and programmes affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Government's Productivity Commission developed the strategy based on guidance from the Indigenous peoples in question. The Strategy marks a major shift from legacies of colonialist and extractive evaluations.

The strategy explicitly builds on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights to self-determination and active participation in decision-making about matters that affect them. It centres Indigenous perspectives, priorities and knowledges, with an Indigenous Evaluation Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members providing leadership and oversight for the Strategy. The Strategy also encourages dissemination, synthesis and translation of evaluation findings in accessible ways that facilitate use by Indigenous peoples, and strengthening these people's capacity to engage in evaluation practice.

TFE principles emphasised: Context, Detective, Justice, Power Shift, Values, Learning

Find out more: Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

4. SDG Leadership Labs



What: a training programme building capacity for transformative and reflexive leadership in service of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Where: various host countries.

Application of TFE: since 2018, the United Nations Development Coordination Office has been working with various UN Country Teams to develop their capacity for systems leadership, cross-system collaboration and innovation in order to advance the SDGs in their respective countries. In 2021, the Presencing Institute began supporting these Leadership Labs with a Theory U approach (see Box 2). Individual Country Labs, involving countries from across the world, are facilitated by a Presencing Institute Faculty team over four to six months.

These labs use a highly participatory action learning approach, explicitly designed to move beyond incremental improvement and realise transformational change. They grow participants' ability to navigate complex systems, draw on multiple forms of intelligence (including head, heart and hands), surface underlying values and issues, sense what futures are trying to emerge, identify transformative leverage points, deeply reflect and listen with openness and empathy, and learn through action and experimentation.

The labs have generated an array of new prototype initiatives in participating countries applying such action learning approaches to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, including through enhancing humanitarian responses, strengthening local leadership, and more cooperative mobilisation of resources. Importantly, the labs are beginning to embed transformation-focused evaluation and learning approaches across United Nations teams.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Detective, Foresight, Power Shift, Partnerships, Values, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: SDG Leadership Labs

5. Global Alliance for the Future of Food (GAFF)



What: a strategic alliance of philanthropic foundations committed to food systems transformation, where Principles-Focused, Developmental and Blue Marble Evaluation are embedded.

Where: global.

Application of TFE: GAFF builds and reinforces diverse cross-sector networks of researchers, grassroots movements, the private sector, farmers, Indigenous peoples, governments and policymakers intent on transforming the global food system towards a more sustainable, secure, and equitable future. Associated on-the-ground projects include regenerative farming and agroecology, while investment initiatives such as Transformational Investing in Food Systems and Funders for Regenerative Agriculture have also been incubated by the Alliance.

Guided by its Director of Evaluation, Pablo Vidueira, the Alliance embeds TFE to support its food system transformation efforts, enabling learning and adaptation based on diverse perspectives and forms of evidence that move beyond simplistic quantitative indicators. Evaluation is treated not as a removed technical exercise, but as a more internally integrated working culture and critical part of GAFF's transformation efforts.

Three particular evaluation approaches are key. Principles-Focused Evaluation is used to evaluate GAFF's continued alignment to its seven transformation-focused guiding principles (Renewable, Resilient, Equitable, Diverse, Healthy, Inclusive, and Interconnected). Blue Marble Evaluation and Developmental Evaluation are used to evaluate the progress of GAFF's individual initiatives as well as the Alliance as a whole. Blue Marble Evaluation encourages a focus on local-to-global linkages and supporting global-scale regenerative systems. It works from a 'Theory of Transformation' that considers impacts at different nested scales, and aims to build momentum, critical mass and positive tipping points in food systems. Methods such as scenario forecasting, scanning for emerging opportunities and risks, and systems mapping are incorporated into GAFF's evaluations. The Alliance has recently been exploring systemic change and evaluative inquiry to deepen its approach to transformation by engaging with different views of what meaningful change is, and using evaluation to ask questions about value and support collective value development.

Across its evaluation work, the Alliance explicitly strives to shift from judging performance against fixed criteria and targets, to supporting continuous collective inquiry, incorporating diverse perspectives with more flexible and context-specific indicators of progress. It also aims to demonstrate the value of evaluation at every stage of learning cycles, moving beyond extractive evaluations constrained by accountability for predetermined outcomes towards accountability for broader learning, adaptation and improvement. A strong emphasis is placed on disseminating GAFF's learning and insights with wider fields of evaluation and system change efforts.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Detective, Developmental, Foresight, Justice, Partnerships, Values, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: Global Alliance for the Future of Food; Theory of a Philanthropic Alliance: The Case of the Global Alliance for the Future of Food (Michael Quinn Patton & Ruth Richardson)

6. *Buen Vivir* (Ecuador and Bolivia)



What: two South American countries that have enshrined an Indigenous-informed approach to wellbeing and Rights of Nature in their constitutions and legal systems.

Where: Ecuador and Bolivia.

Application of TFE: the *sumak kawsay* cosmology of the Andean Quechua and Aymara peoples refers to a holistic flourishing of life, rooted in harmony between people and wider nature. Ecuador and Bolivia have both embedded this idea (as the related term *Buen Vivir* or *Vivir Bien*, 'good living') in their national constitutions in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Centring *Buen Vivir* as the goal of economic progress explicitly rejects extractive *Western* capitalist approaches to economic growth and development, and individualistic models of consumerism – instead elevating the importance of ecological balance and communitarianism. Both countries also enshrine the rights of non-human nature in their constitutions or other legislation (notably Bolivia's 2010 *Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra*, or Law of the Rights of Mother Earth), and have been some of the most ambitious voices in international climate negotiations.

These steps radically shift the *criteria* for evaluation. For example, *Buen Vivir* is now core to Ecuador and Bolivia's development plans, and the rights of nature have been upheld in both countries' legal systems in the face of development projects. But there is still a long way to go before *Buen Vivir* is truly embedded across all national policymaking and evaluation in Ecuador and Bolivia, and not just in local solidarity economies. This is highlighted by the fact that extractive oil and mineral wealth is still used to fund the social programmes promised by the *Buen Vivir* model (which have admittedly resulted in impressive reductions in poverty and economic inequality), and the continued prevalence of GDP in evaluating national economic progress. Nonetheless, these countries remain important examples of how evaluation criteria can be fundamentally realigned towards ecocentrism.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Justice, Transformation

Find out more: Buen Vivir: The Rights of Nature in Bolivia and Ecuador (Rapid Transition Alliance); Buen Vivir: The 'Good Life' for People and Planet, Part 1 and Part 2 (Population Matters); Plan Nacional de Desarrollo "Ecuador no se detiene" 2025-2029 (National Development Plan *"Ecuador does not stop" 2025-2029);* Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social 2021-2025 *(Bolivia's Economic and Social Development Plan 2021-2025)*

7. Whānau Ora



What: an Indigenous-led partnership of NGOs supporting people's holistic wellbeing and empowerment, centred around the whānau (family group) as decision-makers who determine their own aspirations and indicators of success.

Where: Aotearoa / New Zealand.

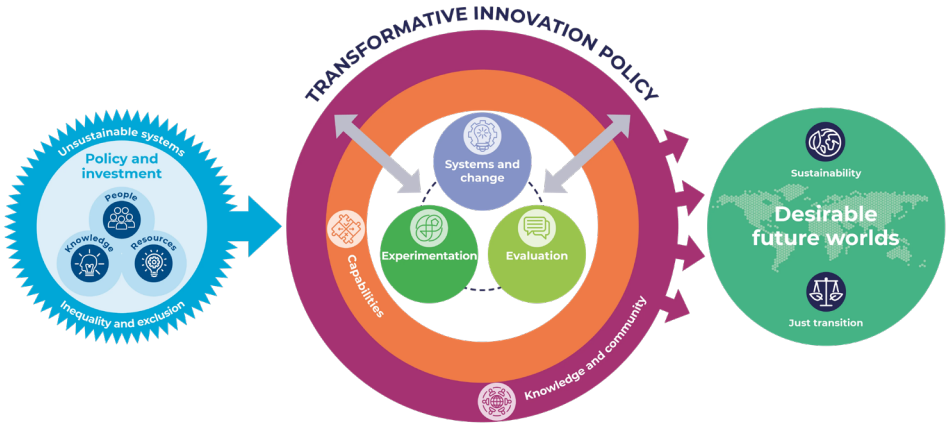
Application of TFE: designed by Māori leaders, Whānau Ora transforms conventional *Western* perspectives on evaluating and supporting people's health and wellbeing, and how the New Zealand Government interacts with Indigenous families. Rather than a deficit-based approach that focuses on isolated problems (such as unemployment or illness) and standardised, narrow metrics of wellbeing, Whānau Ora adopts a strengths-based approach – where *whānau* themselves are asked what holistic family vitality would look like for them. This enables people who are often overwhelmed or disempowered to develop their own solutions, and build their capacity and resilience to become self-managing. This approach forms the basis of the Whānau Ora Outcomes framework for evaluating *whānau*'s *rangatiratanga* (self-determination).

Community-based Whānau Ora partners reside in the communities they support, using local knowledge to adapt to issues happening in their community. Specialist staff act as navigators who advocate for and work with *whānau* to access the integrated services and support that they need. Working with over a hundred partners across Aotearoa, Whānau Ora has supported over 4 million *whānau* over ten years, and catalysed a decentralisation of power and funding from large state agencies to local Māori providers.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Foresight, Justice, Power Shift, Autonomous Evaluation, Values, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: Whānau Ora

8. Transformative Innovation Policy Consortium (TIPC)



What: an international network of policymakers, researchers, investors and funders dedicated to using science, technology and innovation to enable transformations towards sustainable futures, underpinned by a transformation-focused theory of change and evaluation approach.

Where: global; coordinated by the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex Business School, in partnership with INGENIO (Spanish National Research Council / Polytechnic University of Valencia), and Utrecht University.

Application of TFE: core to TIPC's activities is 'transformative innovation policy': policy supporting social innovation to address complex societal challenges and encourage systemic change towards sustainable futures. TIPC supports such policy experiments through its global community of practice, open-access resources (including from the TIP Resource Lab and Open Learning Series), and local hubs and collaborations.

Transformative innovation policy is characterised by a complexity-informed view, diverse stakeholder collaboration and perspectives, and continuous experimentation, adaptation and learning. These principles are in turn embedded in TIPC's 'Formative Evaluation Theory of Change for Transformative Outcomes'. This evaluation approach, advanced through TIPC's community of practice and intended for transformative innovation policy evaluations, tracks emergent outcomes with transformative potential and develops iterative and nested multi-level theories of change. It is designed to be adapted to particular contexts, and has been applied in a collaboration between TIPC and Sweden's national innovation agency Vinnova to evaluate food system transformation in Sweden, for example.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Detective, Developmental, Power Shift, Partnerships, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: TIPC Methodology: A Formative Evaluation Theory of Change for Transformative Outcomes

9. World Ethic Forum



What: a diverse collective of thinkers, community leaders, elders, farmers, artists, activists, researchers, and more-than-human voices using deep, transformation-focused relational inquiry to explore the shared practices and capacities that rekindle a culture of care and kinship in service of all life.

Where: global; originated in Switzerland, where the first four annual gatherings of the Forum have taken place.

Application of TFE: the World Ethic Forum exemplifies how deep evaluative inquiry can be built into organisational cultures. This inquiry is built around core evaluation questions: *How can radically shared aliveness, grounded in a culture of care and kinship, be enabled and put into practice across sectors, places, and disciplines? What are the collective practices and capacities required to do so?* The primary holders of this inquiry are an international group of c. 50 'Firekeepers', many of whom are working at the frontline of efforts to address global crises (e.g. climate COPs) and regenerate planetary health. The Firekeeper Circle meets annually in person and online throughout the year, including as working groups aligned to the Forum's seven Thematic Strands of inquiry. The Firekeepers hold space for deep listening to diverse perspectives, reflexivity, co-creation, connection with the more-than-human, and finding common ground in the midst of complexity and messiness. They are encouraged to bring questions to their local contexts and return with stories and responses to share with the wider Circle. Insights from this experience are tracked, documented and shared through the Forum's Participatory Action Research process, in multiple formats including videos, podcasts and stories as well as blog posts, journal articles and books.

The World Ethic Forum's sophisticated processes of collective sense-making are supported by methods including Generative Scribing, Social Field Resonance, Systemic Constellations, and Council practice. These enable the Forum to express subtle aspects that are typically left as implicit in collective capacities and practices for transformation.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Developmental, Detective, Justice, Partnerships, Values, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: World Ethic Forum

10. Climate Investment Funds (CIF)



What: a major funder of climate action both applying TFE in its independent evaluations, and supporting use of TFE in its funded projects via its influential Transformational Change Learning Partnership.

Where: global; headquartered in Washington, DC, USA.

Application of TFE: CIF mobilises finance for action tackling climate change via six multilateral development banks, the World Bank, and other implementing partners. Its Evaluation and Learning (E&L) Initiative supports CIF's mandate as a 'learning laboratory' by coordinating targeted and timely evaluation and learning activities, including commissioned independent evaluations (e.g. by Itad). Priority learning themes include how CIF is contributing to transformational change, just transition, socioeconomic development, and mobilisation of wider climate finance.

A key part of its E&L Initiative is the Transformational Change Learning Partnership (TCLP): a multidisciplinary, multistakeholder network that seeks to advance and promote understanding and realisation of transformational change in climate action. The TCLP has been influential in designing frameworks to support TFE, including Five Dimensions of Transformational Change (Relevance, Systemic Change, Speed, Scale, and Adaptive Sustainability), and Signals of Transformational Change[51,52] (describing short- to long-term signals that might indicate whether more systemic change is occurring). Such perspectives are integrated into evaluations of CIF's effectiveness (along with a contribution analysis approach), and the wide array of evaluation toolkits shared by CIF for application in different contexts.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Detective, Developmental, Justice, Autonomous Evaluation, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: Climate Investment Funds' Evaluation and Learning Initiative

11. International Evaluation Academy (IEAc)



What: a global network of transformation-focused evaluators aiming to catalyse transformation of the wider evaluation field.

Where: worldwide.

Application of TFE: the IEAc is emerging as one of the foremost international networks of transformation-focused evaluators, and is closely partnered with other influential like-minded evaluation organisations (e.g. Global Evaluation Initiative, EvalPartners, and EvalIndigenous). TFE-aligned approaches are in the DNA of the IEAc's individual members working in their own contexts, including Developmental Evaluation, Blue Marble Evaluation, Made in Africa Evaluation, TFE itself, and many others. But the IEAc has recently gone further through its 3 Horizons Evaluation Initiative (3HEi): using the Three Horizons foresight framework to design a strategic plan for catalysing transformation of the wider evaluation field, and understand what this transformation must entail. This strategy aims to bring the evaluation field into alignment with the urgent need for societal transformations towards regenerative futures, in response to the deepening polycrisis.

The IEAc is using its 3HEi findings to inform the development of working groups exploring different dimensions of the transformation needed. Topics being explored include: embedding transformative ways of working; the implications of regenerative orientations for evaluation; Artificial Intelligence and evaluation; complex systems; futures and foresight; rights, gender and local voice; and decolonising evaluation, amongst others. Across the groups, the IEAc is exploring how to embed, embody and model the desired transformation within the organisation itself as well as wider evaluation systems – mirroring transformations at personal, organisational, and sectoral scales.

TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Developmental, Foresight, Justice, Autonomous Evaluation, Partnerships, Values, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: 3 Horizons Evaluation Initiative

12. Collaborative for Bioregional Action Learning and Transformation (COBALT)



What: a partnership and platform building capacity for bioregional regeneration in multiple focus regions across the world, supported by a highly developmental, transformation-focused evaluation approach.

Where: headquartered in Portland, Maine, USA, but supporting initiatives in many other regions, including in Scotland, Colombia, Canada, Ireland, Ghana and Iceland.

Application of TFE: COBALT's strategy is rooted in navigating a time of profound ecological and social change, and co-creating inclusive, *regenerative futures*. Its bioregional regeneration approach works deeply from the unique histories and potential of particular places, and strengthens citizens' connection to them through immersive place-based learning experiences, ecological restoration, and co-stewardship.

COBALT's evaluation approach strongly embodies transformational, developmental and participatory principles. COBALT recognises the highly dynamic nature of the world it operates in: the Gulf of Maine (one of COBALT's bioregional foci) is one of the fastest-warming coastal ecosystems in the world, for instance. COBALT responds with adaptive governance and plural ways of learning through partnerships of Indigenous leaders, scientists, artists, local communities, and many other practitioners. Relationships with Indigenous communities help to honour and empower ancestral ways of knowing and being, while collaborations with scientists support rigorous ecological monitoring (e.g. in seagrass restoration) – all underpinned by a principle of data sovereignty. COBALT also uses a variety of systems thinking, storytelling, visual and digital tools (e.g. StoryMaps) to support shared understanding, coordination, and informed decision-making.

Evaluation in COBALT is guided by three core dimensions of exploring how change happens (iterative cycles of process analysis), what change looks like (outcomes analysis, informed by the Orders of Outcomes framework), and how it endures (Pathways to Transformation – or understanding, mapping and influencing long-term trajectories that connect practice and learning to lasting shifts in systems, relationships, and ways of being). Also key to its evaluation is its emerging Living Atlas, co-developed with COBALT's partners Zedaxis and Bosque Fractal. This is an innovative, co-designed digital platform supporting cross-bioregional learning and evaluation. It aims to help communities see, connect, and navigate the complex systems shaping the places they call home, weaving together ecological data, governance insight, and local knowledge.

The Living Atlas embodies the 'glocal' perspective that is integral to Blue Marble Evaluation: the ability to see and work with local-to-global linkages (indeed, Glenn Page – COBALT's founder and Executive Director – was instrumental in developing the Blue Marble Evaluation network itself via partnership between SustainaMetrix, Michael Quinn Patton and others). The Atlas does this by combining a 'macro level' with a 'vignette level'. The macro level is for seeing intersections of ecological, biophysical, social, financial, and spiritual systems and the types of capital they generate in support of regeneration (e.g. different communities sharing their climate emergency response plans) – helping to reveal potential synergies and gaps. Vignettes, meanwhile, are co-developed, highly immersive, detailed, cinematic 3D experiences for connecting people to their place in a deeply engaging way. They might include games, or digital twins of systems linked to the bioregion that can provide visions of future states and potential impacts of interventions.

Through its Bioregional Learning Journeys, Living Atlas, and other initiatives and frameworks, COBALT is embedding transformation- and regeneration-focused evaluation into action both within and across bioregions. As a member of the Buckminster Fuller Institute Design Lab, COBALT contributes more widely to a shared effort to build the tools, models, and partnerships needed to support thriving regions at a planetary scale.

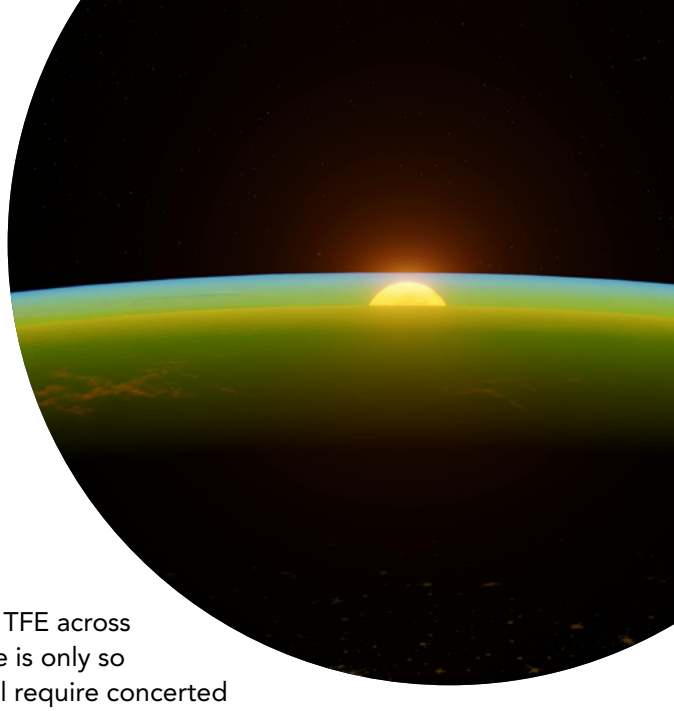
TFE principles emphasised: Complex Systems, Context, Developmental, Detective, Foresight, Justice, Power Shift, Partnerships, Values, Learning, Transformation

Find out more: Collaborative for Bioregional Action Learning & Transformation

LESSONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

The twelve case studies are just a small handful of many others across the world – from the Three Horizons-informed, patient-empowering evaluation of Scotland's Fife Shine social care programme to the Indigenous-led evaluation of the international Podong Indigenous Peoples Initiative or British Columbia's First Nations Health Authority. Nonetheless, some important features can be noted from the selected cases.

- While many individual principles of TFE are reflected in different case studies, initiatives that implement all of the principles simultaneously are rare.
- Most of the case studies demonstrate evaluation playing supporting, framing, learning and accountability roles in service of transformation. Few of them show evaluation as a leading contributor and catalyst of accelerated systemic change. This is likely due in part to the long-term nature of transformations, but also the challenge of shifting evaluation cultures from merely evaluation of transformation, towards evaluation *for* and *as* transformation (Box 7).
- A critical aspect of how TFE is applied is redressing centuries of colonial imposition and violence by putting evaluative leadership back in the hands of Indigenous and other marginalised peoples and communities. This is particularly emphasised by the Australian Government Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy and Whānau Ora, for instance.
- Many of the case studies showcase how transformation-focused organisations and initiatives think *beyond* themselves and support implementation of TFE more widely through communities of practice and sharing insights and resources – a key aspect of the Partnerships Principle.
- Many of the case studies – such as Food for the Future North Yorkshire, SDG Leadership Labs, Global Alliance for the Future of Food, the World Ethic Forum, and COBALT – illustrate how evaluation can be much more than just a periodically applied technical exercise, and become embedded as a more continuous working culture of inquiry and learning.
- Changing *criteria* are key leverage points for TFE – as illustrated by Wales' Well-being of Future Generations Act, or Buen Vivir in Ecuador and Bolivia, for instance. But shifting criteria in itself is insufficient: those criteria must also be embodied in real-world action to avoid becoming tokenistic, which is easier said than done. This emphasises the importance of Principles-focused Evaluation to evaluate fidelity to *principles* and *values*, including transformational intent (Box 8).
- While all of the case studies engage with the idea and practice of *transformation* in some way, a *regenerative* orientation is often less clear. Few of the case studies reflect all of the principles of Regenerative Evaluation, for instance.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION

We are still a long way from embedding and mainstreaming TFE across communities, organisations, institutions, and societies. There is only so much that *evaluators* alone can do to support this, and it will require concerted action and wider cultural shifts across all *evaluation actors*. The most consequential shifts depend on those who commission and fund evaluations (particularly governments, multilateral institutions, philanthropic foundations and private investors) being willing to redefine what they expect of evaluation – including longer time horizons, more flexible terms of reference, accountability to learning rather than to predetermined results, and the courage to commission evaluations that may challenge their own assumptions.

Some key areas required for advancing TFE include[25]:

- Overturning ingrained understandings and narratives of evaluative rigour, relevance and purpose in the political economy and institutional cultures of evaluation.
- Developing more flexible terms of reference for evaluations that allow for continuous adaptation, and more sustained, long-term resourcing of evaluation rather than as relatively short-term discrete projects.
- Reaffirming the power of evaluation as a deeply human practice in a world increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence. This means celebrating human gifts of empathy, interpretation through lenses of lived experience and contextual understanding, integrative judgement shaped by ethical reasoning, sensitivity to power and tacit information, and the relational skills necessary to build legitimacy for evaluation findings among diverse stakeholders.
- Bridging the artificial schism between more formal, systematic evaluations (especially the more technical and 'value-free' designs that are often still upheld as a gold standard), and the innate, intuitive, informal evaluation that each of us applies every day – instead seeing these as two ends of a continuous spectrum of evaluation practice, both of which potentially play a role in catalysing desirable transformations.
- Developing and normalising new competencies for TFE in evaluation capacity development and social learning, both for evaluators and the wider systems in which evaluation takes place. This is particularly pertinent to evaluation education and training, communities of practice, conferences and other peer-to-peer learning, living labs, and intermediary agencies and networks facilitating transdisciplinary exchanges. Particularly important is building evaluators' *facilitation* skills as well as *assessment* skills – as emphasised in the Power Shift Principle.
- Engaging substantively with non-*Western* evaluation traditions on their own terms, rather than as supplementary perspectives to a conventional, largely Western core. This means working directly with the methodologies these traditions have developed through appropriate invitation, attribution, and reciprocity*. The transformation called for in evaluation is in important ways a recovery of what these traditions have long held, contextualised for the challenges of this era.

* We appreciate that our own guide is significantly lacking in this respect, and are continually challenging ourselves to strengthen it in our future work.

- Engaging more deeply with the question of who decides what counts as desirable transformation. This is one of the most politically consequential aspects of TFE, and a critical dimension of the normativity, subjectivity, and power relations inherent in transformations.
- Increasing engagement between the evaluation field and fields of regenerative practice, including regenerative design, regenerative development, regenerative economics, regenerative food systems, and regenerative tourism. These two strands of practice can learn a great deal from each other.
- Supporting the critical shift from a culture of human-nature separation and hierarchy towards cultures underpinned by relational worldviews of human-nature interconnectedness and interdependence.
- Focusing on the arena of economics as increasingly fertile ground for consolidating links between evaluation, transformation and regeneration. Evaluation reminds us that all economic activity is essentially evaluation activity, with that evaluative question at the heart of all economics – 'What do we value?' – providing a leverage point to shift economic values and activities towards the regeneration and flourishing of life. Recent work summarising principles of 'new economics' beyond neoliberalism[72] provides clear opportunities for evaluation.
- Learning how to relinquish our illusion of control, and adopt a more exploratory, adaptive, experimental approach to navigating and stewarding transformations that tolerates ambiguity and uncertainty and increases alignment to natural cycles – as epitomised by the Taoist philosophy of *wu wei* (Box 6).
- Applying collaborative, transdisciplinary, and action-oriented research on the implementation of TFE, where researchers work closely alongside transformation efforts and evaluation teams. This includes learning from inspiring exemplars where TFE is being applied – like the twelve case studies illustrated above.



SECTION 6: TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

This guide has hopefully given you an entry point into deepening your understanding and engagement with transformation-focused evaluation (TFE). You have now learnt about some core features of evaluation, transformation, and TFE, and why they are needed. You have been introduced to a diverse toolbox for operationalising TFE. You have seen how initiatives and organisations around the world are striving to put TFE into practice, and some critical next steps required for embedding TFE more widely across societies. In this section, we summarise a set of key take-home messages from the whole guide.

- Evaluation can be defined as the process of determining the value of something. It underpins most human activity, profoundly shapes our societies, and can be applied in relatively formal, systematic ways as well as more informal and intuitive ways.
- Transformations are fundamental systemic changes occurring over time. They are essential to overcome global crises. Transformations are also qualitatively distinct from more superficial forms of change, subjective and normative, manifested across different scales, and both emergent and intentional.
- Regenerative futures and dynamics are a powerful and necessary orientation for transformations, and evaluation. In regenerative dynamics, social and ecological health reinforce each other across multiple scales, such that 'life creates conditions conducive to life'[9].
- Evaluation plays vital roles in contexts of transformation. It is needed to maintain transformational intent, enable agility and rapid adaptation to dynamic conditions, make sense of complexity, encourage reflexivity and deeper forms of learning, and ultimately support transformation efforts to take wiser and more effective action.
- TFE can be defined as *evaluation practice that contributes to catalysing transformations towards regenerative futures*.
- TFE represents a fundamental shift from the limitations of conventional evaluation practice in multiple ways – including in its complexity awareness, power relations, and purpose. In its most radical sense, TFE takes a more active and normative role in seeking and encouraging desired transformations – not just providing passive support. TFE is also seen as a continuous *part of* change processes rather than removed from them.

- TFE represents a vital relearning of long-standing non-Western evaluative traditions – including from Indigenous, African, East Asian, and Latin American cultures – which for centuries have centred systemic interdependence, relational accountability, plurinationality, agility, holistic understandings of wellbeing, and social-ecological regeneration.
- There is a diverse array of approaches, methods, frameworks and tools available for putting TFE into practice. TFE is more than just applying particular tools, however – it's about how tools are applied in service of a broader goal of catalysing desirable transformations.
- Principles and methods for TFE are well-established, but there is much less understanding of how TFE can be designed, implemented and embedded in transformation efforts in holistic ways. We can nonetheless learn from exemplars already applying aspects of TFE around the world, including national governments, food system transformation and bioregioning initiatives, philanthropic organisations and other funders, Indigenous communities, and international networks.
- The twelve case studies selected in this guide illustrate:
    - the challenge of applying TFE in ways that align to its full suite of principles and shift from evaluation *of* transformation to more activist evaluation *for* and *as* transformation;
    - the importance of redressing centuries of colonial imposition and violence by putting evaluative leadership back in the hands of Indigenous and other marginalised peoples and communities;
    - how transformation-focused organisations and initiatives think *beyond* themselves and support implementation of TFE more widely through communities of practice and sharing insights and resources;
    - how evaluation can become embedded as a more continuous working culture of inquiry and learning;
    - the importance of both shifting evaluation *criteria* and embodying those shifts in practice;
    - and the challenge of embedding a holistic regenerative orientation alongside transformation-focused approaches.
- Critical next steps for mainstreaming TFE in practice include:
    - overturning deep-seated mindsets, expectations and misconceptions about evaluation;
    - developing more flexible terms of reference for evaluations;
    - reaffirming the power of evaluation as a deeply human practice in a world increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence;
    - seeing evaluation as a spectrum from more innate, intuitive, informal evaluation to more formal, systematic applications;
    - developing and embedding new evaluation competencies;
    - engaging with non-Western evaluation traditions on their own terms;
    - engaging more deeply with the question of who decides what counts as desirable transformation;
    - accelerating engagement between the evaluation field and regenerative practice;
    - addressing cultures of human-nature separation;
    - focusing on the arena of economics as increasingly fertile ground for consolidating links between evaluation, transformation and regeneration;
    - learning how to relinquish our illusion of control;
    - and supporting all of the above through collaborative, transdisciplinary and action-oriented modes of research.
- Evaluation is far more than just a technical exercise. It has substantial untapped potential to catalyse transformations towards regenerative futures where planetary life can flourish. At its most powerful, evaluation is a profound, wise, reconnective, transformative and life-enhancing practice.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Below is a selection of resources that we have found helpful for transformation-focused evaluation.

BetterEvaluation: this Global Evaluation Initiative platform compiles a wealth of evaluation approaches, methods, frameworks, tools and case studies, many of which are relevant to TFE.

Blue Marble Evaluation: an initiative and platform building capacity for transformation-focused evaluation with a global perspective, based on Michael Quinn Patton's Blue Marble Evaluation approach. See also Michael's associated book, *Blue Marble Evaluation: Premises and Principles*[73].

Tomorrow and Then: previously 'Evaluation and Transformation', Zenda Ofir's influential blog series is full of rich insights into the world of evaluation, including its deep history as well as current issues.

EvalIndigenous: formed in 2017 as one of the five networks of EvalPartners, EvalIndigenous aims to ensure that global and national evaluation systems and policies recognise and support Indigenous aspirations, and facilitate increased understanding of and support for the implementation of culturally responsive Indigenous evaluation practices. Its website acts as a hub for numerous projects and resources related to Indigenous Evaluation.

International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) books: IDEAS hosts a substantial body of writing on TFE from leading evaluators around the world, emerging from IDEAS-hosted conferences and other events. These open-access books include *Evaluation for transformational change: Opportunities and challenges for the Sustainable Development Goals* and *Transformational Evaluation for the Global Crises of Our Times*; a separate but related book *Transformational Change for People and the Planet: Evaluating Environment and Development* also grew out of IDEAS conferences. IDEAS' contributions additionally led the development of the Prague Declaration on Evaluation for Transformational Change (Box 4).

The Periodic Table of Evaluation: Michael Quinn Patton and Sara Vaca's valiant attempt to provide a comprehensive and accessible overview of the evaluation field in a format based on the Periodic Table of Elements, highlighting the field's complexity, diversity and interconnectedness.

The Regenerative Evaluation Living Paper: a recently published result of collective inquiry by the growing Regenerative Evaluation Community of Practice (hosted by Unity Effect) laying out principles, practices, frameworks, methods and case studies of "evaluation in service of life".

APPENDIX

This appendix provides more detailed versions of figures for twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation (Figure A1) and the Regenerative Lens (Figure A2).



Figure A1. A more detailed version of the twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation[26].

REGENERATIVE SYSTEMS AND DYNAMICS

A regenerative system maintains positive reinforcing cycles of health both within and beyond itself across multiple scales, such that 'life creates conditions conducive to life'.

- Internal regeneration (health of the parts) is supported by external regeneration (health of the whole) and vice versa
- These cycles occur between humans and wider nature through reciprocal exchange of ecosystem stewardship and ecosystem services
- Grounded in life's innate ability to sense, build, connect, maintain, repair, reproduce, adapt, innovate and evolve itself, and maximising this ability at a planetary scale
- Meeting humans' full suite of needs and enabling ongoing cultural and intellectual evolution

ECOCENTRIC WORLDVIEW

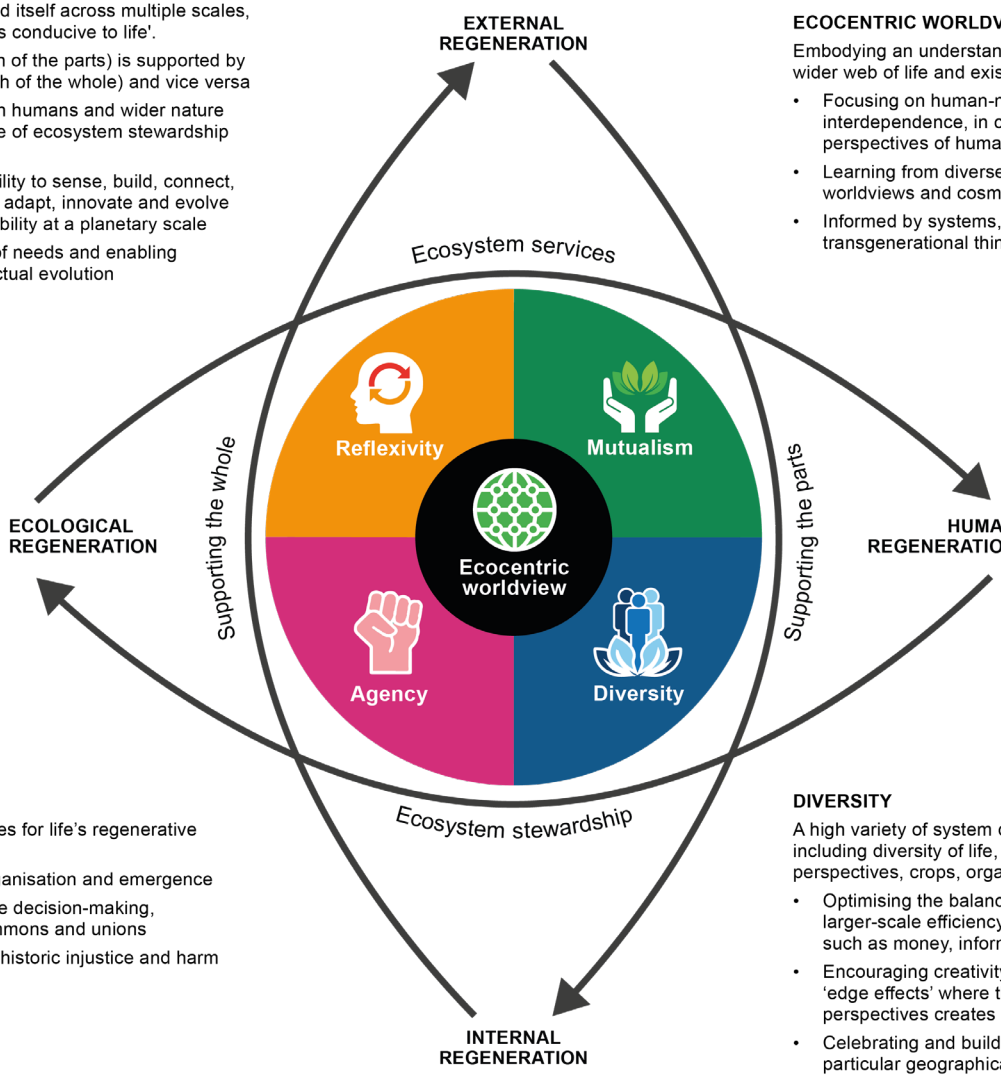
Embodying an understanding that you are part of the wider web of life and existence, not separate from it.

- Focusing on human-nature connection and interdependence, in contrast to anthropocentric perspectives of human superiority over nature
- Learning from diverse non-Western and Indigenous worldviews and cosmologies
- Informed by systems, complexity and transgenerational thinking

REFLEXIVITY

The capacity for continuous collective experimentation, inquiry, evaluation, adaptation, learning and unlearning that challenge underlying assumptions and enable dynamic navigation of ever-changing conditions.

- Humility and openness to new perspectives, uncertainty, ambiguity, uncontrollability, and change
- Regenerative principles embedded in evaluation criteria, methods for envisioning desired futures (such as Three Horizons), and strategy development
- Mindfulness of all other regenerative qualities and their embodiment in practice



MUTUALISM

A high proportion of interactions that benefit all parties, both within and between different nested scales.

- Cooperation, reciprocity and coevolution, built on an ethic of care
- Resource-sharing and commoning
- Sum of all interactions working together supports a healthy ecosystem ('network mutualism')

AGENCY

Providing freedom and resources for life's regenerative expression.

- Enabling ground-up self-organisation and emergence
- Participatory and co-creative decision-making, cooperative ownership, commons and unions
- Decolonisation and healing historic injustice and harm

DIVERSITY

A high variety of system components and interactions, including diversity of life, ecologies, cultures, language, perspectives, crops, organisations, and role specialisation.

- Optimising the balance between small-scale diversity and larger-scale efficiency/streamlining of flows of resources such as money, information, and materials
- Encouraging creativity, innovation, transdisciplinarity, and 'edge effects' where the interface between different perspectives creates novelty
- Celebrating and building on local uniqueness (e.g. of particular geographical regions)

THE REGENERATIVE LENS

Figure A2. A more detailed version of the Regenerative Lens framework with explanations of its components.
The figure was designed by Sam Buckton, based on recent research[19], and rendered by Dave Gledhill of 1790 Creative Ltd.

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Sam Buckton is a 'pracademic': a facilitator, researcher, evaluator and teacher with a primary interest in understanding how to support societal transformations towards regenerative futures, especially through evaluation practice. As a researcher with the FixOurFood programme at the University of York, he gained a PhD in Human Geography and Environment in 2026 and has advised and contributed to the likes of the IPBES Transformative Change Assessment[2], Global Assessment for a New Economics (GANE), the International Evaluation Academy (co-leading its Regeneration Working Group), Unearthodox, the Transformations Community, Collaborative for Bioregional Action Learning & Transformation (COBALT), and national and regional food strategies in the UK. He works as a consultant facilitator and evaluator helping organisations to design and evaluate transformation-focused strategies for action. He is also an ecologist and naturalist, and has led fieldwork training for various nature conservation charities. Sam lives in York, within the wider Yorkshire and Humber bioregion of north-east England.

Ioan Fazey is a Professor at the University of York with internationally recognised expertise in societal transformations. He works as a facilitator, coach, and trainer, helping groups and leaders navigate complexity and drive systemic change. As an experienced shamanic practitioner, he helps people reconnect with nature's regenerative power and support deep inner transformations. Ioan has conducted projects on five continents, from working with the Governor of Louisiana to supporting community leaders in Bangladesh, South Pacific, and the UK. He co-founded the Transformations Community and is founder of ShamanicHealing.org.uk.

Zenda Ofir is a South African evaluation and transformation specialist with a PhD in (Ecological) Chemistry. Formerly Director of Research at the University of Pretoria, she has spent over two decades in practice as well as advising diverse organisations worldwide on both development and scientific research strategy and evaluation. She is a former President of the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), and Vice-President of the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) and International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE). She currently represents South Africa on the BRICS New Development Bank's Independent Evaluation Office High-Level Evaluation Advisory Committee. A Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow, she has held honorary and visiting professorships, taught university modules on four continents, and served on the advisory boards of four international journals. Her work focuses on the interests of the *Global South*, the relationship between humanity and nature, and how evaluation can best support urgently needed transformations.

John Colvin is a director of Emerald Network Ltd, a global consulting and scholar-activist community supporting diverse collaborations within and between *Global North* and *South*, and co-lead of the Transformation Working Group of the International Evaluation Academy. He works as a designer, facilitator, writer, evaluator and catalyst alongside initiatives that are seeking to contribute to societal and ecological transformations towards regenerative futures. He recently moved on from his role as team lead of the Independent Evaluator of the UK's Biodiverse Landscapes Fund in order to devote more time to supporting agroecological transformations in Madagascar, Malawi and the UK.



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