

3 October 2023

2023 IsDB Symposium  
The Future of Evaluation: Adapting  
to a Changing Landscape

## Statement of the Director IOE on 'Tackling The Challenges For Evaluation in The Coming Decade'

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Excellencies

Distinguished representatives

Ladies and gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to make a few opening remarks to stimulate the discussion on this very important panel today. Tackling the challenges for evaluation in the coming decade is quite an ambitious topic. I will address just a few points, looking backward at what have been some of the key issues that have defined the last three years and what they are likely to mean as we move ahead in the coming decade.

I think we all accept that the development Paradigm has changed quite significantly, and that the way in which we thought about development – which had terminology like 'first world', 'third world', 'trickle-down effect' – has changed. We have geopolitical repositioning, we have a new Global Order, and we have the necessity for the reform of the United Nations. You also have a greater assertion from countries in terms of the global South where the evaluation capacity and ability has increased significantly. That means that the way in which development is thought about, and the way development is measured also needs to change.

This is really fundamental because there are multiple new realities that we have been have faced with in the last few years. There has been COVID-19, fragility, multiple crises and of course climate change, which cannot be ignored and is now a reality which we live with and feel on a daily basis.

I recently had the honour of working with Ray Rist and Pearl Eliadis, in a book that went out a few weeks ago, and which is now available in Open Access. In the book, multiple authors wrote about their experiences during COVID-19, and how the pandemic impacted the evaluation world. Overall, it presents quite a pessimistic picture which shows that the evaluation community was largely absent. During this period, governments were relying more on big data provided by research institutions to inform recovery plans. In essence, the world order changed in so many ways that the effects will be felt in many, many decades to come.

Evaluation needs to recognize that it cannot be 'business as usual'. While it needs to maintain the principles of independence, credibility and utility, a key issue that has to come in is 'relevance'. Evaluation needs to be more agile, more responsive.

Over the past twenty years, I've seen certain changes. First, evaluation societies and evaluation as a profession have grown. There's been a lot more formalized professional training, and there is a growing body of literature. The IPTED community has reached over 7,000 participants. The National Evaluation Capacity series has reached over 180 countries, and continues to grow. The beauty of it is that it's government talking to government about their experiences, and the stories are those of how governments engage and try to build up evaluation.

In 2020, the now former head of the World Bank evaluation group, Alison Evans, and I decided that evaluation needed to be more coherent. At that point, we started the Global Evaluation Initiative, which is an umbrella body that aims at coherence. GEI works to build up capacity. Its strength, again, lies in the fact that it is demand driven and takes into account context.

The priorities today show us that evaluation cannot just be about measurements, it's got to be about the "so what?". You can

have all the quantitative data, but if it's not bringing about transformation then evaluation is losing its full potential. In this regard, another book available on Open Access, titled 'Transformational change for people and the planet', offers a collection of essays that try to illustrate the way in which interventions can be transformative.

The interventions of the Islamic Development Bank are transformative, but how do we measure whether they are really transformative in changing the overall quality of life?

Firstly, methodological sound practice remains but we must ensure that complexity and scale are integrated. Classic approaches to evaluation tended to adopt an approach that oversimplified what is very complex. With all the evaluation that's happened over the past decades, why has there not been adequate tangible and sustainable change? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that there has been a simplistic mindset. The reality on the ground is made up of moving parts, it's not static.

Secondly, there's got to be engagement with all stakeholders. I am very interested in this conference to see the diversity of stakeholders. Every voice matters. If you don't bring people on board, at the beginning, through the process and in the end, you are likely to become almost isolated. You're independent but isolated and hence you can have no influence. That is, of course, a challenge which you need to deal with.

Thirdly, the approach needs to be comprehensive and be multi-disciplinary. All of the teachings, all of the literature is important if you really want to fully understand matters with a three-dimensional view.

I would say that the next decade has three important parts. First, any intervention of the multinational development banks must be contextualized. MDBs are going in for a certain purpose to solve a certain problem. Secondly, we must understand that institutional change is difficult, but is needed. There have got to be elements of good governance, transparency, accountability and democracy are elements of evaluation.

Evaluation works well when it has the ability to talk truth to power, and to be uncensored. By the same token, evaluation creates a demand for candid reports and reflection. All evaluations must address inequality and its causes for sustainable development.

The SDGs are about addressing inequality. The evaluation world grew, to a marked extent, during the last decade by attaching itself to the SDGs, and working on how best to measure and improve the attainment of the SDGs. Now that the SDGs are not on track, evaluation does not stop. We have a long road ahead.

What happens when you embrace an independent evaluation culture? Firstly, transparency and accountability must be built. Doing so can take decades. It does not happen automatically. Independent evaluation helps to build credibility. I commend the Islamic Development Bank for embracing an independent evaluation function, because it has nothing to fear and it wants to learn, it wants to improve. This, of course, means that program results become validated by a source that is not partisan and that is not partial.

Now let's explore evaluation phobia. It's the elephant in the room. At the independent office of evaluation of IFAD, we are looking at brain science to begin to understand the recipient to change their knee-jerk reaction of fear to evaluation. We now have in our evaluation manual an element on communicating evaluation findings. We are trying to see whether we can shift what often is an antagonistic relationship, to one that is more constructive. It's not easy, we are still in the process of doing so, but I think that we have initiated the shift.

When you feel that you are being judged, you may get defensive. Instead, we need to accept that negative feedback is positive, that it's okay to talk critically, it's okay to make mistakes and to improve, and that this applies to all levels of all organizations throughout the world.

When is evaluation transformative? The key is authenticity. I heard earlier talk about the diversity of staff and the skills of staff. I need to commend the evaluation office of the IsDB. It has invested in this. When people look at you, and if you have the right gravitas, they are more likely to listen and listen carefully, rather than to view you as being the police.

Therefore, having good policy that protects independence is important. Having skilled evaluators is critical. Knowing how to communicate results is essential. Focusing on transformative evaluative practice is pivotal.

Learning and accountability go together, they're not separate. This conversation that we have now, "let's focus on learning rather than accountability", it's false, it's a false dichotomy. Learning happens through a sound accountability process.

Finally, I invite you to look at what we call 'evaluation pills'. They are short videos, each one is about 90 seconds, which cut to the chase of all evaluative matters. I also invite you to look at our website. All our work is online. In addition to our reports, we also feature our evaluation advisory panel. It is very important to have a group of people, with gravitas, to evaluate the evaluators. We also write success stories that come from the global South, moving away from the notion that development is something that's a preserve of one part of the world and everyone else needs to follow suit.

I thank you for your attention.