Rethinking Evaluator Competencies in an Age of Discontinuity
Summary of Discussion and Chat

Rachael Gibson, The Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions

Following the thought-provoking presentations by the panelists – Madhu Khetan, Ray Pawson, Rogers Mutie, Benita Williams, and Thomas Schwandt – there was an important conversation around different ideas related to rethinking evaluator competencies in the current climate. Below is a summary of some of the key themes and ideas that came from this discussion as well as questions and comments that were raised in the chat.

Empathy
Empathy was identified a critical skill that has emerged as especially relevant during the time of COVID-19. In the context of the pandemic, evaluators are trying to understand the system and its response to the pandemic. In conducting evaluations, evaluators need to be cognizant that thousands of first-line responders across the globe lost their lives and that many others continue to do their work under extremely challenging conditions.

The idea of empathy as a competency strongly resonated with many participants in the forum. It was suggested, for example, that empathy relates to, but goes beyond humility, which was also noted as an important competency for evaluators. Being empathetic was viewed as a vital first step in dealing with the reality of complex and dynamic world problems. And, it was pointed out that projects/programs have been up against huge odds during the pandemic, that they must be acknowledged for this and should not be held to goals that have become unachievable in light of the realities of COVID-19.

Educating the Donor Community
How can donor communities wrap their heads around the reality of complex world problems and move beyond criteria-based evaluations?

In response to this question, it was suggested that evaluators have a great obligation to educate the donor community. Not just to receive the money from them, but to actually work with donors on pressing real world issues. This should be added to the list of evaluator competencies.

Developing Adaptive Competencies in Resource Constrained Settings
Should evaluator competencies be adaptive and complex like the very systems evaluators evaluate? If so, how does this work in the context of constrained resources and time?

An important point in relation to this theme involved demystifying what evaluation and measurement actually are and who should be engaged in these activities. One way to address time constraints is to look at evaluation as a normal activity of implementing and reflecting that can be done by the community and the people who are actively engaged on the ground. Evaluators can build on the evaluative practices that are already inherent in communities. Moving away from academic and Western models of evaluation and looking at evaluation as an integrative process involving a community development process could be useful in reducing time constraints.

Another suggestion was to make better use of the time and money that are available. In some settings, the pandemic has served to stimulate greater communication between, for example, philanthropic

associations and foundations. Different conversation series and collaborations are possible and can be arranged quite easily – for example, setting up a time to talk once per month. Organizing a topical interest group is another way to use existing capacities and resources to share tools around measurement, for example.

Politics
It was noted that there was an "elephant in the room" that had not been adequately discussed – namely, politics. Examples were shared around this and it was pointed out that the development of a diverse array of methods and brilliant ideas around competencies may not necessarily be enough to overcome the issue of politics. The question of politics was viewed as a critical message by several participants in the webinar, because, as one participant observed, the idea of evaluation is to solve real problems.

Intentionality in Integrating Non-Traditional and Traditional Competencies
In the discussion, it was noted that evaluators need to become more intentional in integrating the other kinds of competencies we have been discussing – e.g., cultural competence, negotiation skills, and tact. There needs to be greater intentionality in terms of modifying our curricula beyond traditional competencies.

Collaboration with Providers
The importance of collaborating with providers – those who are good at the other skills mentioned above – was emphasized in the discussion around capacity building for evaluators. We can collaborate with experts in those different fields and help prepare evaluators better.

Continuous Learning
There needs to be continuous learning programs that are accessible to everyone in all regions. It is in this context that VOPEs can play a critical role in facilitating the reach of knowledge in complementary skills. Such investments in ongoing learning do not need to be lengthy – e.g., a 4-year course or a diploma. Short trainings, even those provided at the workplace, can play a valuable role. There were related comments around the importance of fostering learning organizations and reflective organizations.

Competency Frameworks
In building evaluator competencies, it is important to develop competency frameworks. It was acknowledged that there are already several regional efforts along these lines. Continuing efforts to develop agreed upon competency frameworks which are regionally or nationally specific was viewed as important. This is not to suggest that there is a need for one broad framework for M&E; frameworks need to be tailored to the local context. However, such frameworks offer an important guide to evaluators that these other complementary skills are needed for effective practice.

Lack of Agreement on What Evaluation Is
One of the challenges is that we don't agree on what evaluation is. A large group of people that do evaluation think of it as largely a technical occupation of M&E, which is focused on questions of what works. Then there are others who see evaluation as one of the things that applied social scientists do. They are social scientists with some expertise in questions of valuing and judging – an expertise that is shared with community-based researchers, action researchers, collaborative ethnographers, etc. This lack of agreement helps explain why we have gone down the difficult path of trying to identify specific skills for evaluators.