

# Introduction: Transforming Evaluation Practice for “Business Unusual”

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The articles in this thematic segment are all in themselves “unusual” in relation to the usual business of the *CJPE*. Rather than reporting on empirical work or methodological innovations, this collection of articles considers ways in which evaluation practice could now be transformed to contribute to efforts that support “Business Unusual.” I am therefore delighted, and most grateful to the *CJPE* for having agreed to their publication. The driving motivation for coordinating this collection has been prompted by my reflection on more than 30 years of experience in doing and commissioning evaluations in the public health sector. The power and dynamics of neoliberalist socio-political economics have been a major influence on what has been, and still is, evaluated, the motivation behind such evaluations, and their ultimate use. It will become obvious that, in developing this segment, I am far from being alone in recognizing that a fundamental change is needed, and urgently.

The COVID-19 pandemic has urgently brought to the fore the strengths and weaknesses in humanity’s interactions with one another and with the natural world. The interconnectedness between different sectors, systems, and ecosystems from the local to global levels can no longer be ignored. Responses and solutions are being devised all over the world amidst the realization that “business as usual” is unacceptable. Eminent virologists, immunologists, and epidemiologists have now been given a prominent place in the news, providing the scientific knowledge and updates needed to tackle many of the societal and planetary challenges we are facing. Leading health, ecology, and climate experts have appealed to global leaders to use what has been learned from COVID-19 to accelerate climate action, just ahead of the five-year anniversary of the landmark Paris Agreement to limit global warming to “well below 2°C.” [Climate Action Tracker \(2020\)](#) estimates for the first time that the recent wave of net-zero targets has put the Paris Agreement’s 1.5°C within striking distance. Global warming by 2100 could be as low as 2.1°C as a result of all the net zero pledges announced as of November 2020—if only they are implemented in time.

But the above is merely an overview of what many have known for some time. The overarching aim of this thematic segment is to review what all this means for the evaluation community. Is it “business as usual,” or should we be making substantive changes in our practice? Arguments in favour of *transformative evaluation* (e.g. [Mertens, 2009](#)) and *evaluation in support of transformation*

(Patton, 2019) were present some years before the outbreak of COVID-19; since then, they have become increasingly prominent in the evaluation literature, blogs, and discourse (e.g., AEA365 American Evaluation Association Blog; Picciotto, 2020; Ofir, 2017). While there are heterogeneous definitions of what is intended by “transformation” in the context of evaluation (e.g., compare Mertens, 2009; Patton, 2019), there is general agreement that evaluation can play its part in supporting substantial change. This then is the major theme underlying the three papers presented in this collection:

Zenda Ofir’s paper raises awareness about issues related to the current situation in development evaluation. She highlights the reasons for the long-standing divide between the Global South and the Global North and argues for more robust efforts to engage with the underexplored and challenging area of evaluation in support of South-South cooperation, in line with the growing prominence of the Global South in world affairs. She highlights five areas for engagement that can strengthen South-South cooperation and raise the prominence and value of evaluation for the Global South.

Louise Gallagher and Zenda Ofir orient evaluators toward new ideas for supporting environmental transformation. There are now several countries that have bestowed a legal identity on some features of its natural phenomena and, in so doing, are providing them with certain legal rights (the Rights of Nature). They suggest that these new ideas provide timely opportunities with which the evaluation community can already engage. Their article provides arguments not only for the “why” but also for the “how”: Part three sets out practical suggestions for how evaluators can get involved.

Finally, Adam Hejnowicz and Scott Chaplowe turn their gaze to the revolution in data science. They examine how valuable these new tools and approaches can be for supporting evaluators in complexity and systems analysis as they can benefit from the insights revealed by drawing upon new data types spanning different levels of granularity and occurring in (near) real time. This is especially relevant to the field of sustainable development, where there are multiple overlapping and deeply rooted social, environmental, and economic multi-scale challenges. At the same time, they note the challenges and concerns that explain the apparently slow uptake in evaluation’s use of such developments, whilst being optimistic about their future utilization.

## REFERENCES

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## AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Marlène Laebli Loud** is a consultant and trainer in public-sector evaluation. She is former head of the internal evaluation unit at the Swiss Office of Public Health. Her experience therefore includes both “doing” and “managing” commissioned evaluations. She has a keen theoretical and practical interest in the role of internal evaluation units and evaluation utilisation. Together with John Mayne, she edited a book on the subject *Enhancing Evaluation Use: Insights from Internal Evaluation Units* (Sage, 2014).