

EEN Forum 2009 Notes, 6/9/2009 9 a.m.

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## **Featured Presentation: Exceptionalism in Environmental Evaluation: Are We Really That Different?**

George Grob (Discussant), Center for Public Program Evaluation

- Posed a question: How did this topic get into this conference? Why are we concerned about it?

Mikael Hildén, Finnish Environment Institute

- Short answer = “no”
- Some features of environmental problems that have been identified as “special”
  - Complexity
  - Uncertainties
  - Different belief systems/conflicting goals from different stakeholders
- What makes environmental evaluations not so special?
  - Focusing on policy level
    - Evaluations in a policy cycle – recursive process of policymaking with “evaluation” in the middle, but focusing on end results
- The environment is not what it used to be.
  - Environmental issues are increasingly dealt with outside the environmental “core”
    - Climate
    - Biodiversity
    - Chemicals
  - New actors, new agenda cannot be meaningfully evaluated from a pure environmental standpoint
- Regulatory regimes are changing.
  - Regulatory regime = institutional structure and assignment of responsibilities for carrying out regulatory actions
    - General move from prescriptive regimes towards more market-based and “voluntary” public approaches
- Climate strategy evaluations:
  - Why is it so difficult to assess and evaluate climate and energy policies??
  - Based on experience evaluating Finnish climate policies
- Climate policies are strategic “onions” – do not follow neatly, but a number of “layers”
  - How can you evaluate something like that? Challenges...
    - More promises than specific practices; aim is outcome, not results, which produces significant delays
    - Intervention theories (ex: emissions trade) are often left vague
    - Climate strategies are highly political.
- Demand for exact science and the curse of uncertainty – theories on policymaking:
  - Drivers→Pressures→State→Impact→Response [DPSIR]
  - Has a very messy, complicated area where these all come together
- Policy evaluations are part of “post-normal” science”

- How do you live with this?
  - Evaluations of policy integration and policy coherence become key tasks:
    - Need details in policy, but they're hard to come by
- Some solutions:
  - Lifecycle approach to deal with cumulative effects across national borders
  - The assumed cause-effect chain is important, but uncertain and needs to be explored
    - Use DPSIR framework, log models, causal loop models to look at emissions, health effects, economic effects
  - Adaptive evaluations
  - Open, transparent work
- More on adaptive evaluations:
  - Widening time horizon
    - Look back and forward
  - Recognizing points of discontinuity
    - Potential self-organization of societal systems
  - Recursive evaluation
    - Opportunities to revisit evaluations
    - Not ex-post or ex-ante, but ex-nunc (from previous theory)
- That means putting “evaluation” more at the center of the policymaking model
  - Use evaluation equally throughout the process – look at each step, rather than mostly at the end of policy creation
- Special features have to be dealt with:
  - Complexity – get researchers to communicate
  - Long timeframes and uncertainties – use adaptive approaches to changing conditions and evolving problems
  - Different beliefs across stakeholders – again, adaptive approaches
- Conclusion: We are different, but no unique.
  - Follow-up question: Will this make evaluations easier? – No, but hopefully interesting.

Discussion (indented points are Mr. Hilden’s responses):

- Are we ready to use recursive evaluations? They were apparently abandoned due to complications years ago.
  - Recursive evaluations are actually being used in climate analysis, but we need to use them more consciously. See: Biodiversity goals being revisited. Overall, this is a very context-dependent issue.
- Climate pessimism: biggest issues being ignored, every year it’s getting worse. PPM correlated to population. What’s our future with such environmental stressors?
  - From an evaluator’s point of view, DPSIR model allows us to consider questions like these. Looking at each step in the process can create specific discussion towards potential solutions.
- Mr. Hilden said nothing about methodology, but really spoke about context, complexity. Important points about long time scale, the global nature of the environment.

Conclusions: We're not going to get a clear answer to the question "How well are we doing?" We have to accept uncertainty in our evaluation world.

- Discontinuities actually hold the hope of finding solutions. Looking at the many different parts can lead to radical change.
- Interesting introduction of "ex-nunc"; Classic view = evaluate programs, New view = evaluate all parts – proposals, programs, policies, results.
  - Instead of saying "we can't do anything about this," we must look at "where are we now" and where can we go.
- Primarily thinking about "how can we influence policymakers?" But policymakers can also be businessmen, healthcare, etc. – overlapping interests. Some best examples of environmental policies have been driven by businesses – survival of fishing industry, etc. It's uncertain who we can persuade and how we persuade them
  - That's another example of complexity
- Climate change will affect all aspects of society. Knowledge from all "small" evaluations might lead to real policy changes. How can we synthesize/publicize all this information?
  - Using the current DPSIR frame work to link studies is a very good challenge for the evaluation community.
- We've got to do the best we can with what we've got right now.