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Working Session Discussion: EEN Products and Services

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This special working session was convened on the final afternoon of the 2009 EEN Forum to identify and discuss potential EEN products, audiences and workgroups. Prior to the Forum, the EEN Forum advisory group had identified three potential products to support the mission of the EEN:
  1.) *A* Repository of Environmental Evaluations *to act as a centralized location of completed evaluation reports to locate evaluations and evaluators;*
  2.) *An* Environmental Evaluator's Toolbox *of standard tools used in various types of evaluations (evaluation methodologies, quantitative techniques, logic model examples, educational materials, training materials, etc.) that will serve to build networks and enable evaluators to share ideas and evaluation findings;*
  3.) Communications products *about the value and role of evaluation in achieving environmental goals, the value of environmental evaluation in the context of different organizations, and improving the value of environmental evaluation.*

The working session met to discuss the feasibility of these and other products as well as the future of the EEN.

Toolbox
Annelise: After conference call, I thought about other info and resources that would be helpful to people doing information (see handout from Annelise). They include instruments used in evaluations, evaluation reports, websites related to environmental evaluation, research orgs, blogs and wikis, evaluation associations, handbooks/manuals, list of evaluators in environmental evaluation, etc. It would be a place to find the things you need.
  • The 1ˢᵗ step is to see what other sites exist (the others aren't specific to environmental evaluation). You would need financial support to fund this and staff to keep it going. We want to share information in between evaluations. We don't want to reduplicate what's out there but is there a different need within fields related to environmental evaluation?
  • Some evaluators don't know about AEA – AEA doesn't have brand recognition within environmental community, but AEA is a possibility for holding the toolbox and repository

Repository
- of evaluations and projects
- Key – we need to learn from what we've done in the past
- Need a neutral, trusted, 3rd party holder of the information. Who should that be? NFWF?
- Need to involve Foundations of Success, Miradi software people
- Don't just want a list of evaluations of dubious quality. There need to be standards for what we accept. It's a huge but important undertaking.

Communications Products
- Are there standards of evaluation we need to communicate? eg. 'What's the value of evaluation vis-à-vis certain issues?'

Andrew: In the medical field it was very bottom-up. They persuaded individuals to do systematic reviews, built a simple website, got funding in and it took off. Do we have to do it that way for this? Unlike in the medical field, lots of evaluations are being done, and we already have people doing systematic reviews in the environmental field.

Matt: How do we connect the toolbox and repository? You would want to be able to look to collection of evaluations to determine the tools used and vice versa. How should tools be connected to evaluations they were used to conduct?

- You would need a relational database to search – keywords (geographic area, etc.) and to involve a web programmer in the discussion very early on.

Richard: Might be better to create general headings and see what content gets uploaded since you don't want to create a fixed organization before we know what the use patterns will be.

Andrew K: There is knowledge management software for businesses that classifies reports according to content for you.

Kara: Could have periodic reviews of research/topical summaries on recent research linked to full reports (takes staffing, more expensive).

Matt: The linking of tools and products needs to be discussed – do we want it all on one website?

Andrew: Should survey people to see how they'll use them. Do they want to download pdfs?

Andrew P: Some uses will need the data underlying reports but not everyone needs the data – who are the different stakeholders and users?

Annelise: Could do an online survey to find out more about potential users.

Kara: Do a needs assessment to find out what's needed.

Matt: Does a toolbox already exist? Evaluators familiar with AEA will say yes but people that don't know about AEA will say no.

- For evaluation in protected areas – **Marc Hockings** in Australia has collected methodologies for evaluations of protected areas. This would be broader.

Annelise: This allows everyone to get information and shares the value to the greater community.

Richard: It's democratizing access to information. However, our needs aren't the same as everyone so how do we get needs assessment from people outside forum attendees?

Matt: Foundations of Success: database of monitoring and evaluation resources. They have lots of Monitoring and Evaluation resources from the field of biodiversity conservation

Richard: The conservation world has products but that's not true of other fields. There are gaps in restoration, exposure to toxic chemicals, etc. whereas the conservation arena more mature. The others need to catch up.

Annelise: Could we get NSF funding? Is there a grant we could apply to? We'd have to do a needs assessment to identify what community needs and how to best apply for money.

Andrew P: But who will apply for the grant and manage it? Who will have the independence to have credibility and buy-in from whole community?

Andrew K: Could it be a master's student project? We could bring in a grad student in a field dealing with information management? Funders like to do capacity building at the same time.

Annelise: A university site would lend credibility.

Christina K: Have thought about some sort of Center of Excellence for Environmental Evaluation, as part of an existing organization.

Andrew P: EEN can't do this since it's not its own organization.

Richard: Can EPA host it/ convene the effort?

Andrew P: What about a consortium of organizations to own EEN?

Richard: Need to formalize the consortium started by EPA and NFWF. NFWF has narrower conservation agenda so we need broader array of environmental evaluators.

Andrew K: You need institutional support to maintain a database, do quality checks, etc.

Andrew P: It's like developing a journal. You need an editorial office to decide what goes up, an editorial board to support quality control, peer review for validity, and some sort of funding. Who's paying to maintain it?

Cochrane Collaboration – same model

The Collaboration for Environmental Evidence (CEE) would need to see a business plan about how this register of evaluations would be funded. It's relatively straightforward and we'd consider it.

Christina: We can consider AEA and CEE as holders.

Matt: Do we want to define products or EEN's business plan first? Both simultaneously? Is designing a toolbox going to help us understand which group to connect ourselves to?

Christina: Use is critical so let's focus on repository first.

Andrew P: I see repository used by someone starting off doing an evaluation, to help them.

Annelise: In my work, I'd want to know what surveys are out there that have already been used? Which surveys get at 'behavioral change' or X, etc? I need instruments, resources, organizations, etc.

Richard: Some organizations will only want to share evaluations if names/funders are removed so there's no attribution. Is this ok for academic standards? We'd have bigger resource pool if we allow non-attribution.

Matt: There's use for repository in a systematic review, and systematic review may be tool in the toolbox. Shouldn't I design evaluations knowing what is necessary for a systematic review? Do I have to meet certain standards? Need a communications document explaining how evaluations would be useful to systematic review so the right data can be collected. I'd see that as one example of how a repository, toolbox and communications materials are interrelated.

Andrew P: We should think about producing quality data but main thing is quality of evaluations. High quality evaluation matters more than the fact that it can be used in systematic review. Evaluations would provide data that could be used in a systematic review.

Matt: Right, and we can use communication documents to explain this and know what tools are useful in what circumstances, specifically to environmental audiences.

Annelise: Need review team and to develop a matrix of criteria for acceptance.

Andrew K: Can we use user review and use – just see what gets used the most and consider it to be the best resource?

Richard: The problem is no one wants to share negative results so we need to make it safe by making it anonymous.

Christina: If other fields have done this (collecting studies that have been done) we should start there (eg. Looking at the medical field).

Richard: We need to get out of conservation box and look at other dimensions of the environment.

Matt: FOS should be involved. A possible example would be the MEERA site.

Richard: It could be an aggregate of existing toolboxes (in agriculture go here, in toxic exposure here, etc.). We just need clearinghouse that has basic info/resources. It could be a portal linking resources where they already exist and showing where environmental evaluations are already useful. Then we would also want to fill in gaps for resources in some areas. It could also have general resources in methods, PowerPoints from forum, etc.

Christina: What's available out there? What are the gaps? What's the need? We need get input from others. What can we structure to address this and be inclusive of other realms?
- Next step: Need a business plan mapping out needs, problems, gap you're filling, products, strategy, etc. to get funding and figure out where to go from here. I'm willing to help with that, and review something.

Richard: Need 1pg charter for EEN products and tools, a subcommittee saying who's represented, what the group will do, etc. We need someone from local government and to constitute the group formally with a specific intent.

Christina: There's a difference between creation and input. More people will say 'once it's created I want to review and make modifications' than will want to be involved in the creation.

Kara: Should be sure and include FOS and other organizations early (Tim, etc.).

Matt: We will start this effort by sending the notes from this conversation out to this group for review and clarifications. We will use these notes to draft a document to start the the development of an EEN business plan and send it back out to this group plus a few others who have said they are interested, including specific questions to identify what it needs to look like.

Within the business plan, we have to identify goals etc.
We have to know what group will help create the business plan, agree on a purpose, decide what orgs we seek to have involved.
- Need to clarify purpose, meet gaps in accessing information about environmental evaluations. Will be an iterative process.

1 sentence purpose for EEN products and services:
To support and advance field of environmental evaluation, the EEN proposes the development of an electronic resource for the dissemination and utilization of relevant tools and resources.
- Need code of best practices
- Sharing of rigorous information
- Building evaluation capacity
- Of global utility/application

Richard: I'm concerned about evaluation getting packaged as a formalized process that requires all this rigor. We need to accept a whole spectrum of evaluations and include informal 'check ups' in adaptive management cycles. Need to acknowledge the value of the entire spectrum. We need people to do informal evaluations well
- 3D spectrum of evaluation – need graphic that you can click on to go into resources there

Andrew P: Are informal evaluations valuable to the 3rd party? Third parties may find the process useful but not product. In the toolbox, we could include them to show how to do an appropriate evaluation for your organization. But in repository we need standards so reports are of use for a third party.

Kara: Can be useful in learning from other people's mistakes in the process

Christina: Peer reviewed v. everything. It's possible to distinguish between the two in searching.

Matt: Need to refine the logic model of EEN. Could develop a taxonomy of environmental evaluations. I was talking to Warren Kimball who does environmental impact assessments but who didn't see link to other types of environmental evaluations. We need to connect areas.

What could be retrieved from the site?
- Data / outcome data
- implementation fidelity – are people doing what they said they would do, authenticity to program objectives
- instruments – methods, techniques, access to datasets, questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, monitoring plans, etc.
- case studies for teaching etc.
- best practices/worst practices
- directory of practitioners
- organizations
- data to support decision making

Possible organization of site:
- scope: from formal to informal
- discipline specific
- DPSIR categories

Annelise: Should create a wiki or moodle site to have postings and so we're editing a common document.