

EVALUATING TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE.

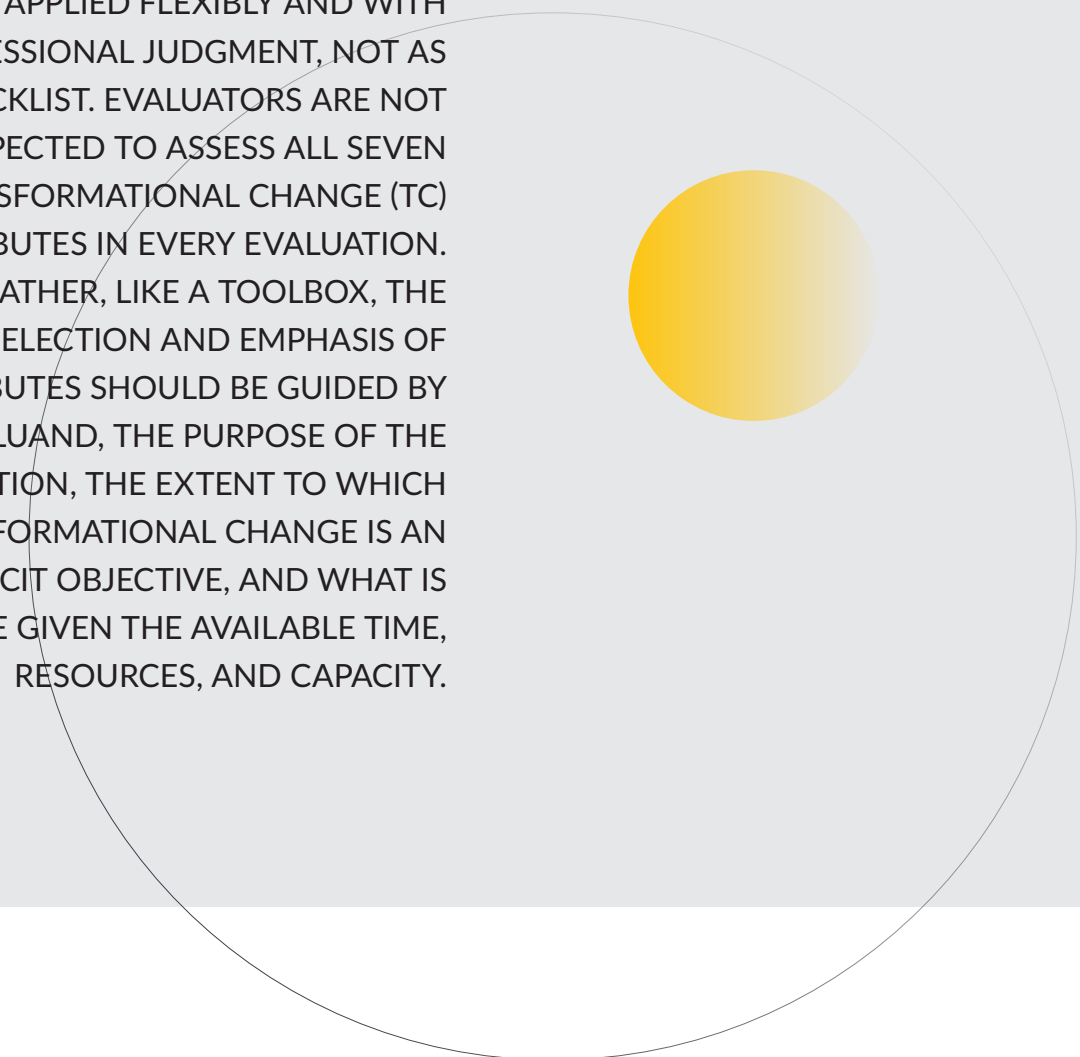




INTRODUCTION

This overview presents the essential elements of the IEO framework for evaluating transformational change (TC) in the GEF. It is intended as a concise, practical reference for IEO evaluation staff and the broader GEF Agency network, and is designed for use across the evaluation cycle—from ex ante design and formative implementation to ex post assessment. More detailed guidance on applying this framework is provided in the Guidance Note for Evaluating Transformational Change.

USING THIS FRAMEWORK A NOTE ON FLEXIBILITY

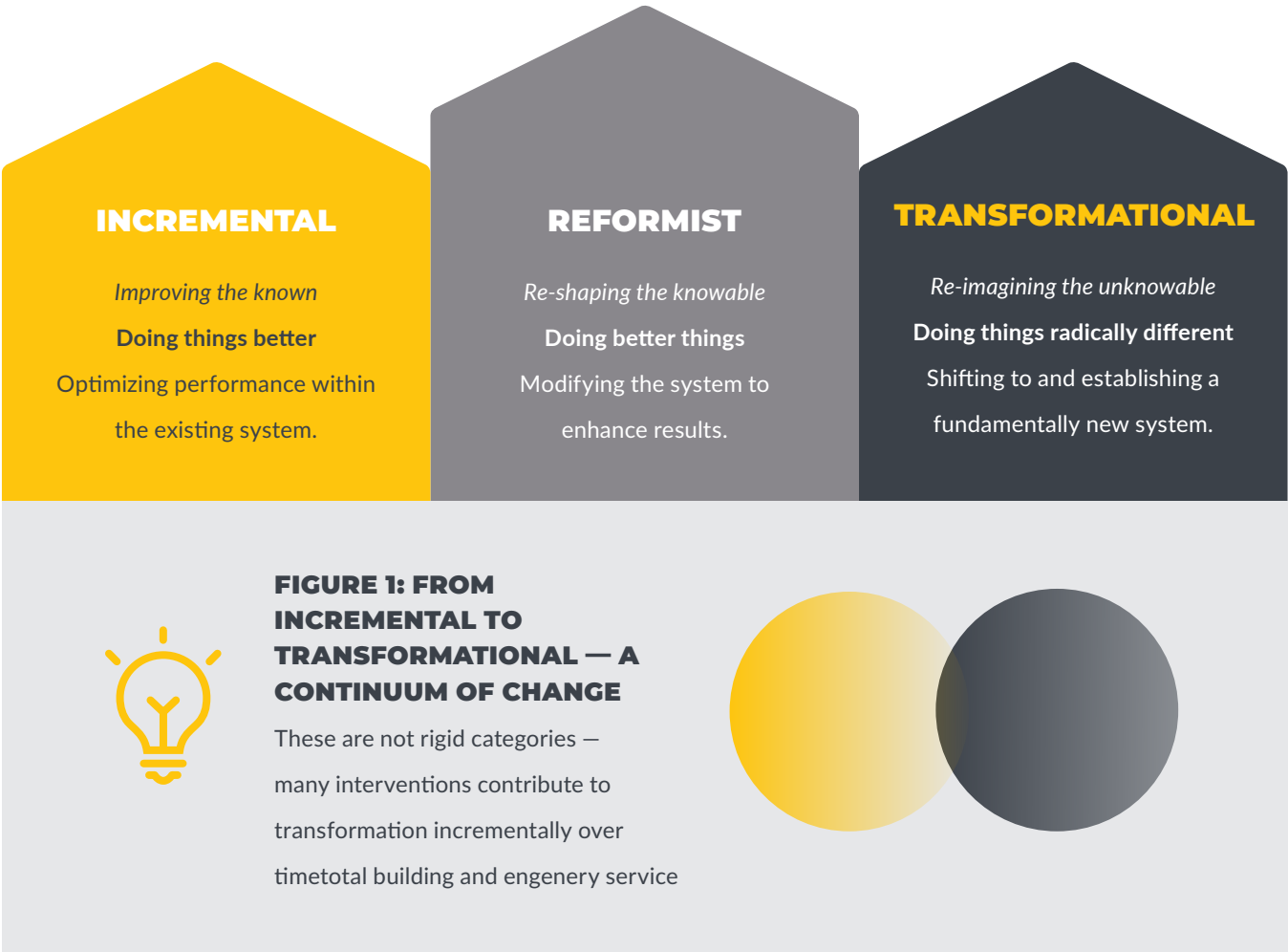


THIS FRAMEWORK IS INTENDED TO BE APPLIED FLEXIBLY AND WITH PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT, NOT AS A CHECKLIST. EVALUATORS ARE NOT EXPECTED TO ASSESS ALL SEVEN TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE (TC) ATTRIBUTES IN EVERY EVALUATION.

RATHER, LIKE A TOOLBOX, THE SELECTION AND EMPHASIS OF ATTRIBUTES SHOULD BE GUIDED BY THE EVALUAND, THE PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION, THE EXTENT TO WHICH TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IS AN EXPLICIT OBJECTIVE, AND WHAT IS FEASIBLE GIVEN THE AVAILABLE TIME, RESOURCES, AND CAPACITY.

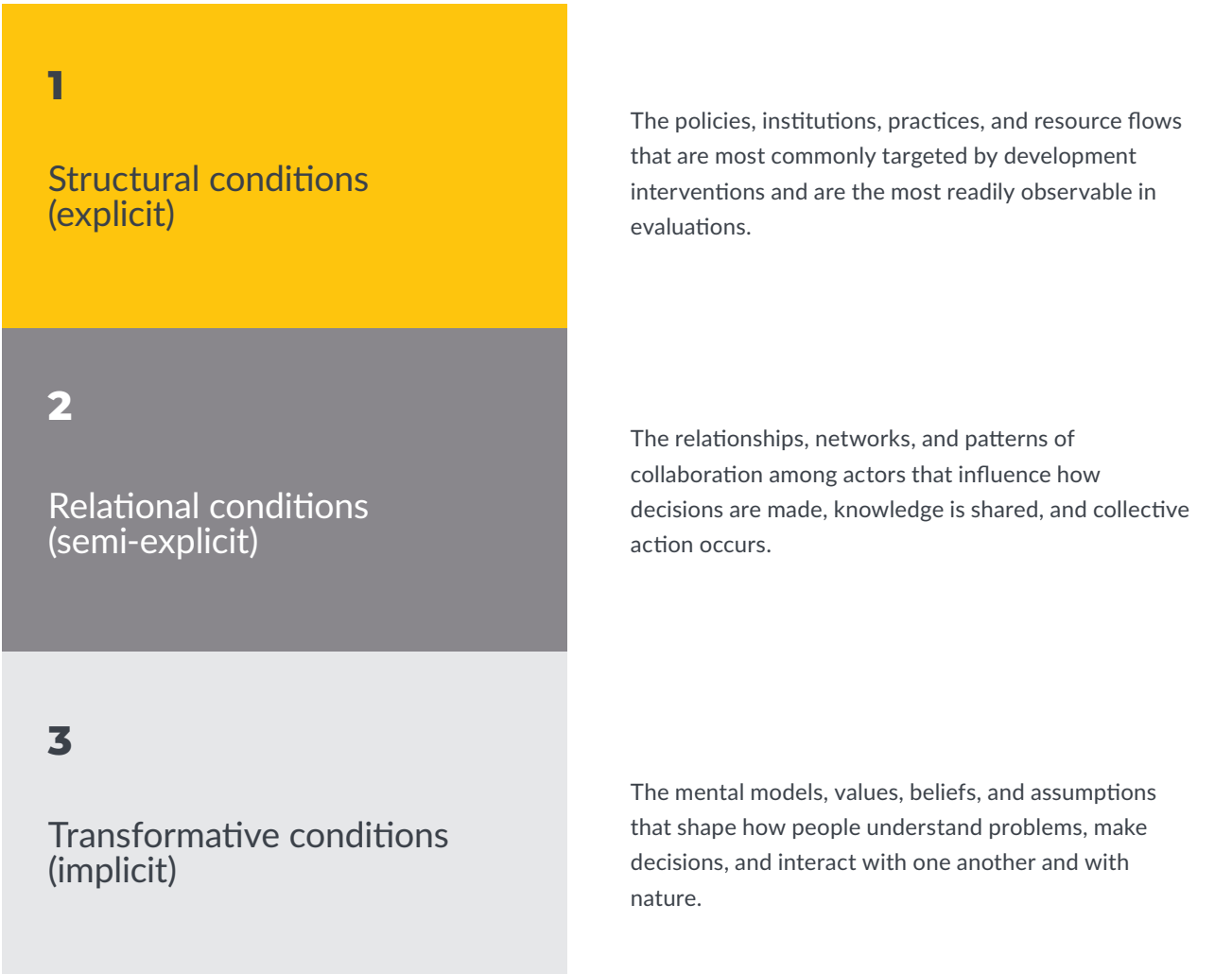
WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE— AND WHY DOES IT MATTER FOR THE GEF?

Transformational change (TC) recognizes that some changes are more than incremental improvements—they fundamentally alter how systems are structured, governed, and sustained. The IPCC defines transformation as altering the fundamental attributes of a system, including value systems, regulatory, legislative and bureaucratic regimes, financial institutions, and technological or biological systems. The GEF-9 replenishment places transformational change at the center of its strategy, calling for interventions that transform the systems driving environmental degradation. As a result, the ability to assess transformational change is one of the most important contributions the IEO can make.



"Transformational change (TC) is not inherently positive or negative—it is value-neutral. Transformations can generate both benefits and costs, and their effects may vary across stakeholder groups, locations, and over time. Evaluating TC therefore requires attention not only to whether transformation occurred, but also to who benefited, who bore the costs, and how these effects evolved over time."

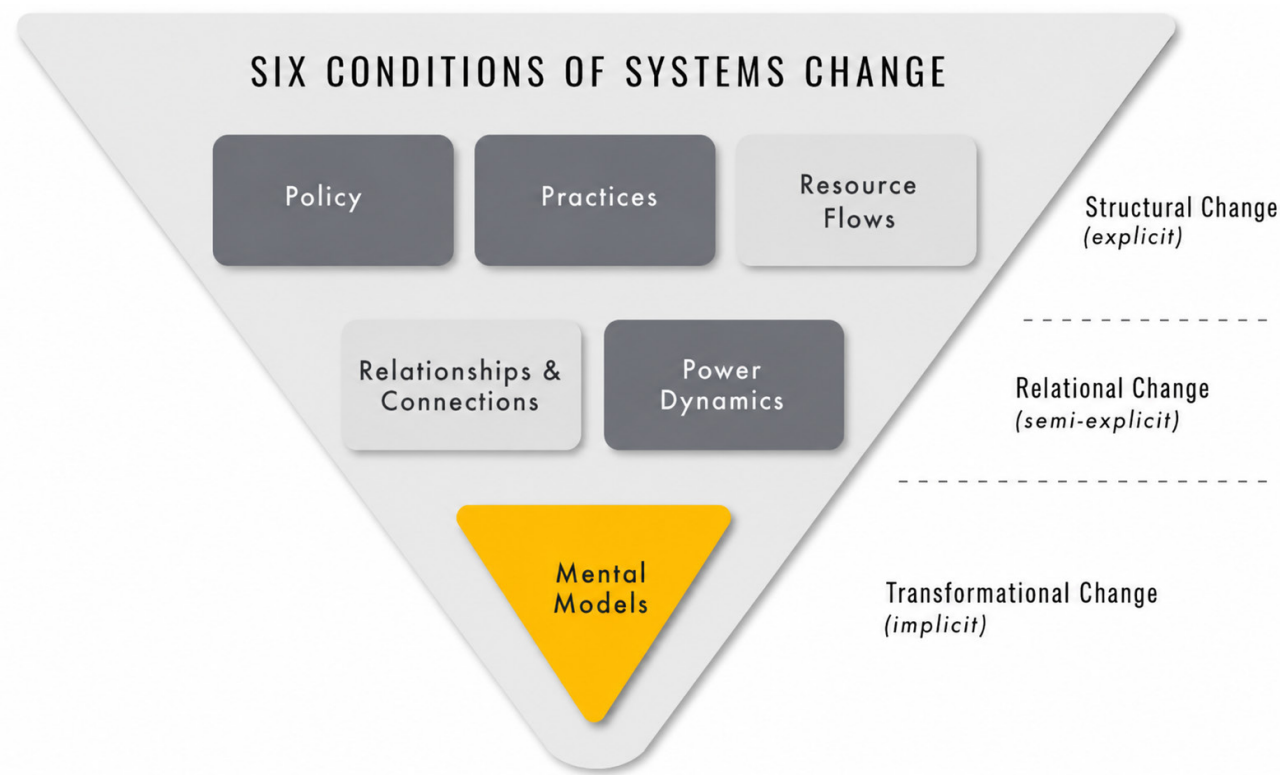
TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE (TC) TYPICALLY OPERATES ACROSS THREE INTERDEPENDENT LEVELS OF SYSTEMS CHANGE, AS ILLUSTRATED IN FIGURE 2:



TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

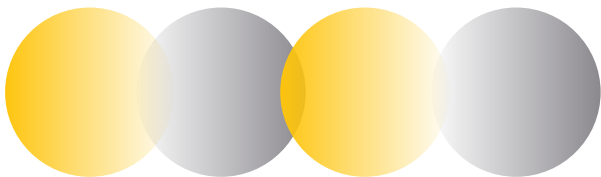
The deeper the change, the more likely it is to endure—but also the more difficult it is to achieve and evaluate. Transformational change typically involves progress across all three levels. Structural changes alone are unlikely to be sustained unless they are reinforced by changes in relationships, collaboration, and the underlying assumptions and norms that shape how systems function.

FIGURE 2: SIX CONDITIONS OF SYSTEMS CHANGE (WATER OF SYSTEMS CHANGE)



Source: Kania, Kramer & Senge (2018). The Water of Systems Change. FSG

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE EVALUATION OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE



Transformational change unfolds over long timeframes. Early progress may appear modest without indicating failure. Because transformation often takes years or decades, realistic expectations, intermediate milestones, and ex post evaluation are essential.

Transformational change is systemic, not project-based. Deep change requires a systems perspective across interconnected human and natural systems. Individual projects can contribute, but lasting transformation typically depends on coordinated interventions across sectors, institutions, and scales.

Contribution takes precedence over attribution. In the complex, multi-actor systems in which the GEF operates, the objective is to establish a credible contribution rather than prove exclusive causality. Evaluations should assess an intervention's plausible role within a broader system of actors and influences by triangulating multiple sources of evidence.

No single method is sufficient. Evaluating transformational change requires a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative methods can strengthen the evidence base but should be complemented by qualitative analysis to develop a robust assessment of contribution.

Incremental contributions matter. Not every intervention is expected to achieve transformational change on its own. Well-designed projects can make important contributions by creating enabling conditions, testing innovations, or supporting broader system change.

Transformational intent is not the same as transformational contribution. Ambitious objectives do not necessarily lead to transformational outcomes, while interventions without an explicit transformational objective may nonetheless make important contributions. Evaluations should focus on what an intervention realistically contributed.

Risk is inherent to transformational change. Transformation requires experimentation, adaptation, and a willingness to accept uncertainty. Evaluations should therefore examine how risks were identified, managed, and adapted to over the course of implementation.



SEVEN ATTRIBUTES FOR EVALUATING TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE



The IEO framework for evaluating transformational change (TC) in the GEF has two complementary components.

The first is the set of seven GEF IEO evaluation criteria: the six OECD DAC criteria—relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability—plus the GEF-specific criterion of inclusion, which assesses equitable participation in and benefits from interventions. Together, these criteria provide the normative basis for assessing the merit, worth, and significance of an intervention.

The second component is a set of seven TC attributes that provide a transformational change lens for analysis. These attributes help direct evaluative attention to the systemic, relational, and transformative dimensions of interventions. They are intended to complement, rather than replace, the evaluation criteria and may be relevant across multiple criteria rather than corresponding to any single one. The seven TC attributes are summarized in Figure 3. Not all attributes will be equally relevant in every evaluation; their selection should be guided by the evaluand, the purpose of the evaluation, and the resources available.

FIGURE 3: SEVEN ATTRIBUTES FOR EVALUATING TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

ATTRIBUTE	DESCRIPTION & EVALUATIVE PROMPT	PRIMARY GEF EVALUATION CRITERIA
Transformational Intent <i>What change is pursued and why</i>	Explicitly articulated ambition of the intervention to move beyond incremental change toward fundamental, systemic transformation — grounded in systemic analysis, inclusive by design, and strategically positioned to trigger or sustain enduring systems change. <i>What evidence suggests the intervention is designed to catalyze a fundamental departure from business as usual — grounded in systemic analysis, inclusive by design, and strategically positioned to trigger or sustain enduring systems change?</i>	Relevance Coherence
Integration <i>How actors and instruments work together</i>	Active integration and coordination of diverse actors, sectors, and instruments in pursuit of TC — recognizing that transformation cannot be achieved in isolation but requires coherent collective effort to reduce fragmentation and build systemic momentum. <i>What evidence suggests the intervention actively coordinates diverse actors, instruments, and knowledge systems to reduce fragmentation and build the coherence needed for collective systemic effort?</i>	Relevance Coherence Effectiveness
Inclusive Human Agency <i>Who drives and owns the change</i>	Redistribution of power and agency toward key stakeholders — particularly marginalized groups — as active drivers and stewards of TC, integrating technical, local, and traditional perspectives to address structural inequality and build deep ownership of more equitable systems. <i>What evidence suggests the intervention has redistributed power and agency toward marginalized groups — building their capacity to drive, govern, and sustain TC as active rights-holders rather than passive beneficiaries?</i>	Relevance Impact Sustainability Inclusion
Agile Speed <i>How implementation responds to complexity</i>	Balance between pace and agility in response to environmental urgency, feedback, shocks, and windows of opportunity — grounded in realistic assessment of existing resources, capacities and constraints, and committed to just transitions and Leaving No One Behind. <i>What evidence suggests the intervention has balanced urgency with adaptability — responding to feedback and emerging opportunities while maintaining commitment to just and inclusive transitions?</i>	Efficiency Effectiveness
Scalability <i>How change spreads and deepens</i>	Adaptation and expansion of TC mechanisms through multiple scaling pathways — replication, diffusion, mainstreaming, and sustained leverage — whether driven by single-point innovations or broader systemic approaches that shift policy, mindsets, and market conditions. <i>What evidence suggests the intervention has spread and deepened change — through replication, policy institutionalization, and shifts in mindsets — toward a step-improvement in global environmental benefits?</i>	Effectiveness Efficiency Impact
Systemic Change <i>Evidence the system has fundamentally shifted</i>	A fundamental shift in the structures, functions, and interrelationships within a system — departing clearly from business as usual by addressing systemic bottlenecks and activating strategic levers to drive holistic transformation, with equity dimensions assessed. <i>What evidence suggests the intervention has contributed to a fundamental shift in system structures, functions, and interrelationships — departing clearly from business as usual at a scale and depth that constitutes genuine transformation?</i>	Impact Effectiveness
Regenerative Systems Sustainability <i>Whether the transformed system endures</i>	Capacity of a transformed system to become self-reinforcing, resilient to shocks, and capable of adaptation and regenerative co-evolution long after external support is withdrawn — maintaining positive cycles of environmental and human wellbeing. <i>What evidence suggests the transformed system has become self-reinforcing — with the institutional capacity, incentive structures, and equity foundations needed to sustain, adapt, and regenerate TC gains long after external support is withdrawn?</i>	Sustainability Impact

APPLYING THE TC LENS

The considerations below highlight the key principles for conducting credible, systems-informed evaluations of transformational change.

- Start with the system, not the project.** Define the system within which the intervention operates, identify the key actors and institutions, and determine who can enable or constrain transformational change. Consider perspectives across the micro, meso, and macro levels to understand how the system functions and where the greatest opportunities for change may lie.
- Define system boundaries deliberately.** Boundaries that are too narrow may focus attention on symptoms rather than underlying drivers, while boundaries that are too broad can make the evaluation unmanageable. Define boundaries based on the evaluation purpose and revisit them as understanding of the system evolves.
- Clarify transformational intent early.** Identify the fundamental changes in system structures, functions, or relationships that the intervention seeks to influence. While explicit transformational intent is not a prerequisite for contributing to transformational change, understanding the intended direction of change provides an important basis for evaluation.
- Develop a contribution-oriented Theory of Change.** A transformational Theory of Change goes beyond a linear results chain to explain how an intervention is expected to influence system drivers, interactions, and feedback loops. Where appropriate, backcasting—starting with the desired future state and working backwards—can help identify plausible pathways to transformational change.
- Assess the system's position on the transformational change continuum.** Consider using a maturity framework, ranging from pre-emergence and emergence to acceleration and stabilization; to characterize the current state of the system and provide a basis for assessing progress across ex ante, formative, and ex post evaluations.
- Frame evaluation questions at two levels.** Distinguish between TC-focused questions, which directly assess contributions to transformational change, and TC-informed questions, which apply a transformational perspective to broader evaluation issues. Not every evaluation question needs to focus on transformational change, but the overall evaluation design should reflect a transformational lens where relevant.
- Prioritize contribution over attribution.** Triangulate evidence across quantitative and qualitative methods, multiple sources, levels, and stakeholder groups to develop a credible assessment of the intervention's contribution. The aim is to reduce uncertainty, not to establish definitive attribution.
- Engage stakeholders throughout the evaluation.** Meaningful stakeholder engagement strengthens the credibility and validity of the evaluation by bringing in perspectives that are often inaccessible through document reviews and quantitative analysis alone. Attention should be given to ensuring that the perspectives of underrepresented and affected groups are reflected in the assessment of transformational change.
- Guard against "transformational change washing."** Avoid assuming that ambitious objectives or positive results are evidence of transformational change. Actively test assumptions, seek disconfirming evidence, and apply rigorous standards before concluding that transformational change has occurred.
- Remain adaptive and transparent about uncertainty.** Evaluating transformational change rarely produces clear-cut answers. Adapt the evaluation approach as new evidence emerges, and be explicit about uncertainties and limitations. Recognizing uncertainty is an essential part of evaluating complex systems.

APPLYING THE TC LENS IS NOT A LINEAR PROCESS, BUT AN ITERATIVE, CONTEXT-SPECIFIC ONE.

The Guidance Note for Evaluating Transformational Change provides more detailed guidance on each of these considerations, including practical approaches, illustrative theories of change, and a comprehensive set of evaluative questions for each transformational change attribute.



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