

Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) to guide Footprint Evaluations

E. Jane Davidson and Andy Rowe

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Introduction

This list of key evaluation questions (KEQs) is one of several outputs of the [Footprint Evaluation project](#). Its primary purpose is to show one potentially useful way in which sustainability might be embedded into an evaluation – by infusing it into each of the high-level evaluation questions that guide the project. *Not all evaluations would necessarily cover all seven KEQs*, although a reasonably comprehensive evaluation probably would include at least some version of each.

This list of KEQs has been designed so that it can apply in any sector, type of evaluand¹, level of analysis, etc. As such, the language is deliberately generic; *each evaluation team will need to rewrite/interpret the questions* for the particular population/community, context, culture, sector, evaluand, and evaluation audience, using wording that makes sense for that application.

These KEQs may also be used in conjunction with – or as a way of applying – national or organizational evaluation criteria such as the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria.

Who might use these KEQs, and for what?

- An organization commissioning an evaluation might adapt these KEQs for inclusion in a Terms of Reference (TOR) or Statement of Work (SOW) – or as a source of ideas for making existing KEQs more sustainability-ready.
- An evaluation team could adapt the KEQs for use as a high-level framework to guide an entire evaluation.
- The KEQs may also be useful to inform sustainability-ready design, implementation, monitoring, and adaptation.

The list is grounded in a conceptualization of evaluation as being fundamentally about asking and answering *evaluative* questions, i.e., questions that ask the evaluation team to not just *describe* the evaluand and its results in value-neutral terms, but to systematically determine *how good, valuable, worthwhile, and important* these things were (i.e., to draw *explicitly evaluative conclusions*). [They have been developed from earlier versions in Jane Davidson’s evaluation workshops and publications.]

Identifying the relevant values and unpacking the evaluative terms in each of the KEQs is a core part of the job of answering them. This is no simple or formulaic task; these discussions are an extremely important part of any evaluation. Although we will define a few key terms in a glossary to be included with this set of KEQs, evaluative terms will not be defined in detail. Rather, this important task is intended to be led by those conducting the evaluation.

A strong set of sustainability-ready KEQs will be challenging for many evaluation teams to answer well. Part of Footprint’s effort is to help create tools, resources, and learning opportunities that will build capacity for evaluators to answer questions like this.

¹ Evaluand = whatever is being evaluated (e.g., a policy, strategy, program, project, initiative, construction, organization, business, change effort, etc.)

KEQ SUCCINCT VERSION	KEQ SUB-QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS
<p>KEQ 1: Relevance & Coherence</p> <p>How relevant is the evaluand to the issues facing the population/sector and the natural environment – and how well does it complement other related efforts in the context?</p>	<p>How well does the evaluand address the relevant strengths, needs, challenges, and aspirations of people, communities, organizations, and the natural environment on which they depend?</p> <p>How well does it complement other initiatives or change efforts that affect this population/sector and the natural environment?</p> <p>Given any changes or trends in the human and/or natural systems, is this still the most important thing we could be doing here right now?</p>
<p>KEQ 2: Design & Adaptation</p> <p>How well does the design address the strengths, needs, and aspirations of both human and natural systems — in ways that are equitable, restorative, and enable both to thrive?</p>	<p>How well does the program take into account the different spatial and temporal scales salient to the relevant human and natural systems?</p> <p>How well does the design plausibly address not just symptoms but root causes and systemic drivers of problems and inequitable and catastrophic outcomes?</p> <p>How effectively did consultation ensure that the needs and concerns of affected people and environments were understood and taken into consideration before finalizing design and proceeding with rollout, and to respond to emerging concerns along the way?</p> <p>How realistic are the approach and design, given the budget, timeline, capacities, and political and social capital?</p> <p>How well has the design been adapted and improved over time to respond to emerging conditions and learning and to achieve the needed human and natural system outcomes?</p>

KEQ SUCCINCT VERSION	KEQ SUB-QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS
<p>KEQ 3: Implementation</p> <p>How well has the evaluand been implemented so that the right people and natural system elements receive what is most needed at the right times and places and in the right ways?</p>	<p>How well has the evaluand prioritized and managed the delivery of support so that the right people and natural system elements receive what is most needed at the right times and places and in the right ways?</p> <p>How appropriate is the balance between implementation fidelity and responsive adaptation/tailoring to context, culture, population, landscapes, changing priorities, differentiated needs and aspirations, etc.?</p> <p>How well does implementation serve to uphold and enhance the rights, dignity, and self-determination of the relevant populations, including their responsibilities for the stewardship of natural systems?</p>
<p>KEQ 4: Outcomes & Impacts</p> <p>How good, valuable, and important are the outcomes and impacts on both human and natural systems, particularly where equity and/or previous harm needed to be addressed?</p>	<p>Outcomes and impacts include changes contributed to or prevented by the evaluand across their relevant temporal scales – and their shelf life (sustainability).</p> <p>This includes effects on the human system as well as the natural environment – all affected subgroups, communities, organizations, society, the economy, and the natural systems within which they exist – both intended and unintended, for both the target population/environment and anyone or anything else substantially impacted.</p> <p>How substantially did the evaluand contribute to (or adversely impact) the most important strengths, needs, and aspirations of both human and natural systems – particularly of the most critical and/or threatened parts of the natural system and those who had been most marginalized, oppressed, and/or least well served in the human system?</p> <p>How appropriately does the evaluand value, privilege, protect, or exploit different parts of the relevant human and natural systems (e.g., different groups of people, different parts of the ecosystem)?</p> <p>How well did the evaluand contribute to or achieve the needed <i>systemic and structural</i> changes, including processes and capacities, so that root causes are addressed (not just symptoms) and results sustained?</p>

KEQ SUCCINCT VERSION	KEQ SUB-QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS
<p>KEQ 5: Patterns, Outliers, and Links</p> <p>How did the evaluand influence change – and then how did that change continue to unfold – in the relevant coupled human and natural systems? Where, when, for whom, and under what conditions did we see the most and least valuable outcomes? Why?</p>	<p>What can we learn from the pockets of strong and weak performance, particularly any that were surprising?</p> <p>How well did any anticipated theory of change (or theory of transformation) hold up? What was the emergent theory of change?</p> <p>What different causal mechanisms were in play, both within and across systems, for and among different groups of people and parts of the environment, and under different conditions? What was it that made the relevant causal mechanisms fire so effectively or ineffectively?</p> <p>What patterns were evident, particularly those that might help us understand the nature of complex, emergent change such as effect-reinforcing and effect-limiting causal loops, fractals, and tipping points?</p> <p>How do different temporal and spatial scales affect the patterns?</p>
<p>KEQ 6: Durability</p> <p>How resilient and durable are the changes that the evaluand has contributed to, and how well are they likely to last in the face of emerging environmental and other changes?</p>	<p>How well has the evaluand helped ensure that any installations or benefits it has left behind will last in the face of emerging environmental or other changes?</p> <p>How well have any needed <i>systemic and structural</i> changes been embedded, supported, and protected, so that the system and its activities no longer cause or exacerbate harm or inequitable outcomes – particularly for critical or threatened parts of the natural system and for those who had historically been marginalized, oppressed, and/or least well served in the human system?</p> <p>How adequate are the capabilities, capacities, systems, structures, and resources to build on the needed change, including continuing to address and repair past harm, restore equity, and support wellbeing in both the human and natural systems?</p>

KEQ SUCCINCT VERSION	KEQ SUB-QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS
<p>KEQ 7: Overall Value</p> <p>How good, valuable, or worthwhile is the evaluand overall, given its relevance and coherence, its design and implementation, the value of its outcomes and impacts, their durability, and what it cost to achieve them?</p>	<p>This question is the synthesis step, which takes into account all of KEQs 1 to 6, plus costs to both systems.</p>

The following terms have been identified as useful to include in a forthcoming glossary. Please suggest any other terms we should add.

Glossary	Other key concepts
<p>Coherence</p> <p>Coupled human and natural systems</p> <p>Do no harm / circular economy</p> <p>Durability</p> <p>Evaluand – whatever is being evaluated (e.g., a policy, strategy, program, project, initiative, construction, organization, business, change effort, etc.)</p> <p>Human systems – people, groups, communities, organizations, society, economies, cultures, etc.</p> <p>Natural and engineered solutions</p> <p>Natural systems – all non-human living and naturally occurring non-living things</p> <p>Natural system categories, e.g., ecosystems, landscapes, species, ...</p> <p>Nexus</p> <p>Relevance</p>	<p>Restoration / regeneration</p> <p>Subjectivity and objectivity</p> <p>Sustainability</p> <p>Values</p> <p>Temporal scales – Footprint takes the position that the default temporal scale is 7 human generations (back 3, forward 3, plus current interests involved in the intervention) – looking at how things used to be and looking forward to a world for our grandchildren’s children.</p> <p>Spatial scales</p> <p>Units of account – who is involved, who counts.</p> <p>Unit of analysis – program/project/initiative, cluster of initiatives, the system.</p> <p>Level of analysis – policy or multi-level governance, a territory or community, a specific bounded program.</p>