

# REPORT ON

## **Panel Discussion:** *Building Evaluation Systems and Capacities to Leverage Context – A Way Forward*

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at

## **Evaluation Conclave 2025 and Summit for the Future of Evaluation**

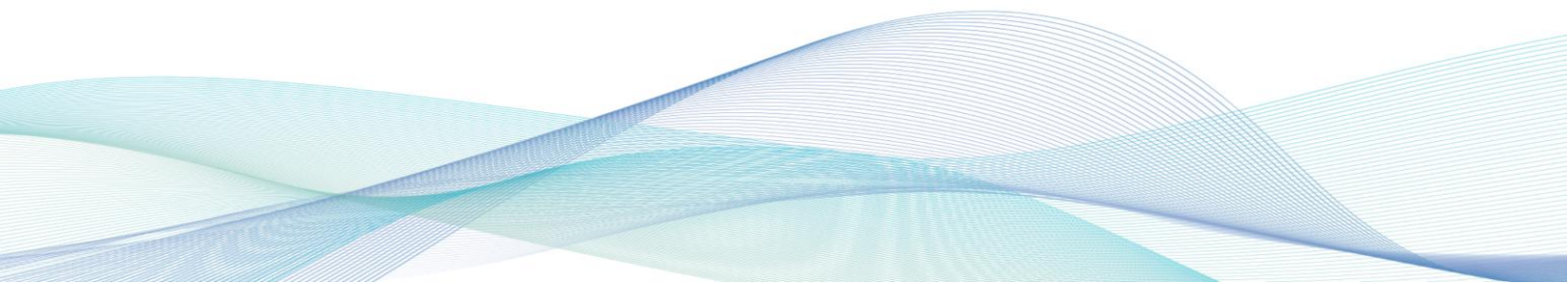
Colombo, Sri Lanka

### ORGANISED BY



# Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Highlights from the Discussion	3
3. Way Forward	8
Additional Resources	9



# 1. Introduction

The **Community of Evaluators–South Asia (CoE-SA)** and the **Evaluation Association of Bhutan (EAB)** jointly hosted the **Evaluation Conclave 2025** from **May 27 to 30, 2025, in Colombo, Sri Lanka**. A key highlight of the Conclave was the “Summit for the Future of Evaluation,” held on May 29 and 30, in collaboration with the Eval4Action campaign and its co-leaders: UNFPA Independent Evaluation Office (IEO), EvalYouth Global Network, Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation (GPFE), and the International Organisation for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE). The summit was formally inaugurated by Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, Honourable Prime Minister of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

As part of the sub-theme **‘Building Evaluation Capacity – Education and Training,’** the Indian School of Development Management (ISDM) and the Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement (GRAAM) co-hosted a panel discussion titled **‘Building Evaluation Systems and Capacities to Leverage Context – A Way Forward’** on May 28, 2025. The panel convened leading experts with deep experience in participatory development and evaluation. Together, they explored how evaluation systems can be grounded in local contexts while remaining responsive to global standards, offering critical insights for the future of evaluation practice in South Asia and beyond.



Dr. Basavaraju R Shreshta  
Executive Director, GRAAM



Dr. Soma DeSilva  
Former Regional Advisor, UNICEF South Asia



Khilesh Chaturvedi  
Independent Evaluator and Faculty Member, ISDM



Dr. Reinhard Stockmann  
Professor, Saarland University, Germany



Dr. Syeda Naghma Abidi  
Program Director, Academics, ISDM

## Speakers on the Panel

## 2. Highlights from the Discussion

The discussion sought to present concrete ways to build the systems and capacities needed to leverage 'context' in the development sector. Prof. Reinhard's session effectively summarised the meaning of 'context' for evaluation from various perspectives.

Prof. Khilesh highlighted the dynamics of stakeholder engagement at all stages of evaluation and the skills required for this purpose.

Dr. Soma's session revealed the issues at the heart of evaluation usage and professionalism in the evaluation domain.

Dr. Basavaraju shed light on the capacities required for evaluation, not only for evaluators but also for other stakeholders, such as the community. He emphasised the need for the community's active engagement as stakeholders in the evaluation process, not just as respondents or subjects. The speakers illustrated their recommendations and strategies using examples from their own experiences.

### 2.1. What is Context?

“ The meaning of 'context' in an evaluation depends on the evaluation's objectives and the specific situations in which it is being undertaken. That is why any attempt to make a comprehensive definition of 'context' is bound to fail because of its amorphous nature  
– Prof. Reinhard

Various examples were provided to illustrate this amorphous nature of context:

- All evaluation approaches conclude that 'context matters', but take it into account to varying extents. For example, in the management approach, 'context' is determined by the information requirements of program managers. In the Realist approach, 'context' is studied to understand under what contextual conditions programs succeed or fail. In contrast, Participatory approaches view 'context' as an integral part of program experiences and outcomes, rather than a separable influence on them.

- In the logical framework structure, 'context' is visible only under assumptions and risks associated with capturing indicators of various outcomes and outputs. In contrast, in the Theory of Change, 'context' is crucial, particularly in planning interventions and defining the pathways of change.
- Context-related CEval<sup>1</sup> approach treats 'context' representing elements outside the locus of control of an organisation. It considers the interests and perspectives of various stakeholders at each stage and utilises their situational knowledge, expertise, and experience.

## 2.2. Dynamics of Stakeholder Engagement



*Ownership of the evaluation process by stakeholders is crucial. Evaluators need to have their feet on the ground. – Prof. Khilesh Chaturvedi*

- Engaging stakeholders requires technical skills, domain knowledge and soft skills. The importance of the evaluator's behavioural traits and kind of engagement with various stakeholders was highlighted through various lived experiences.
- Ensuring participation at each stage of evaluation through various mechanisms such as: conveying what each stakeholder wants to know at the planning stage, multiple debriefing sessions with community at end of evaluation, agreeing to disagree if necessary and providing space for different views of the evaluators and the implementing agency, and in developing recommendations (whether accepted or not) followed by plan of action.
- Stakeholders are not only suppliers of data. The collected data is again presented to stakeholders to determine whether they agree or disagree and to gather their views on the recommendations.
- Skills required for stakeholder engagement: Analytical skills, particularly for assessing 'process' and 'strategy', empathy, objectivity, self-confidence, etc.

<sup>1</sup> <https://ceval.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Stockmann-Handbook-Chap-6-Social-and-political-context-of-evaluation.pdf>

- It is essential to recognise the legitimate stakeholders' claim to participate in the evaluation process.

### 2.3. Use of Evaluation



*Evaluation is of no use if it is not used to solve social problems and make a difference to the lives of people.*

*Do we have a demand for evaluation? Do we have the competency (of people, politicians, Governments) to use evaluation? – Dr. Soma De Silva*

- A conceptual framework for use of evaluation was introduced, which highlighted that the achievement of development goals depends on the use of evaluation, which in turn depends immediately on
  - a) whether evaluation is part of institutional practice (which depends on user competencies)
  - b) on the quality of evaluations (which depends on evaluator competence) and on
  - c) demand and acceptance of Evaluations
- Evaluators should engage people meaningfully from the start, incorporating their perspectives throughout and at the end, to ensure evaluations lead to improvements in their lives.
- For evaluations to be truly useful, they must be supported by a culture of learning and an enabling administrative, social, and political environment.
- Key challenges in professionalism that hinder 'use of evaluation': Limited supervised training for Evaluators—Evaluation is not a mainstream discipline and is not mainstream in government. Sri Lanka is proud to have a National Evaluation Policy, but there is still a long way to go in terms of fully implementing its full potential.
- There is a need for structured academic training in the discipline of evaluation to promote greater professionalism in the field. Evaluation is not a mainstream discipline in South Asian universities. Cutting-edge

technology, quality, and standards, as well as teaching and assessments, all need to be addressed for a quality course on evaluation. A common and unified framework of competencies or common minimum standards is much required.

#### 2.4. Evaluator Skills and Capacities

“ Humility is a crucial quality for an evaluator. Before going to the field, the evaluator needs to wear a hat of ‘I don’t know’ and be an active listener. Humane skills, along with technical and contextual understanding, multidisciplinary thinking, and the ability to understand program designs, are key competencies for an evaluator. – Dr. Basavaraju R Shreshta

- For an evaluation to be used, it must be usable, and for it to be usable, grounding it in context is essential.
- Important nuances of context are often lost when standard evaluation methodologies are applied rigidly, which can hinder the usability of evaluation findings. For example, field experiences revealed that some youths were not using toilets, not due to lack of access, but because it reduced their opportunity to spend time outside. Insights like these emerge only through contextual and participatory evaluations that are grounded in lived realities.
- Need to allocate resources to make evaluation participatory, and the significance of mixed methods to capture contextual nuances was highlighted. Unless policy initiatives are taken to appreciate participatory/stakeholder engagement methods, it will remain just a buzzword.
- The community needs to be an active stakeholder in Evaluation thinking. Building evaluation capacities — not only of evaluators but also of all stakeholders, including communities that participate. E.g., FGDs are sometimes dominated by a few; an active community can lead to more inclusive FGDs
- The evaluation capacity of donors, funders, governments, and other users needs to be built to appreciate the usefulness of evaluation as a

source of learning to begin a new chapter. Evaluations are a pivotal means of creating evidence for the Government.

- Need to Communitise the monitoring process, which needs to be continuous and have limited viability for involvement of outsiders
- The scale and context of the evaluation need to be balanced. Need to balance the agreed and approved methodology and insights from the context.
- Collaboration between academics and practitioners, as well as the role of professors of practice, is crucial for enhancing capacities for contextually grounded evaluations.

### 3. Way Forward

Even though each speaker brought in unique perspectives from their diverse experiences, all of their perspectives converged to make the following important points for a way forward:

- **Make Evaluations Usable:** Unless Evaluations are rooted in the specific context of the program, they won't be of use to implementers and therefore won't have an impact on the development discourse. And to make Evaluations usable, we need to produce very competent evaluators.
- **Revamp Evaluator Capacities:** If context is to be leveraged for meaningful development outcomes, evaluators should possess a strong understanding of both the program and its context, in addition to methodological skills. The envelope of evaluation should be expanded (e.g. to understand policy issues, not just programs). The kinds of capacities required for Evaluation signal towards a balancing act between the scales of context and evaluation, as well as between democracy and communication in stakeholder engagement.
- **Evaluation as a Discipline:** Overall, the session highlighted the need to advocate for a structured academic program in evaluation. There is an urgent need to institutionalise the training of evaluators and the importance of this emerging discipline.
- **Alignment on "Need" of Evaluations:** There needs to be alignment at the policy level on the need for Evaluations and their acceptance in society and among political leaders. We need to convince and show the political and social spheres how important evaluation can be and what value it can bring.

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** The Importance of Stakeholder Engagement in Bringing Contextual Elements to Evaluation was Highlighted by All the Speakers in Different Capacities. Active engagement of all stakeholders throughout the evaluation process at all stages is necessary, balancing this with the use of highly skilled evaluators who possess good communication skills.

### **Additional Resources**

[Building Evaluation Systems and Capacities to Leverage Context – A Way Forward.pptx \(1\).pdf](#)