



Graduation Dinner speech

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The Master of Ceremonies, distinguished members of the [IPDET 2.0](#) Consortium, the University of Bern, Centre for Evaluation (CEval), and the Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank, supporters of the program; the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, other supporters and most importantly you, the IPDET graduates, good evening.

I bring you all the congratulations and good wishes of the [IEO](#) of the [UNDP](#) and my own professional network, the United Nations Evaluation Group ([UNEG](#)) – where I serve as one of its Vice Chairs.

I also wish to thank the IPDET Secretariat for their important work, and the visionary [Ray Rist](#) and [Linda Morra](#) for starting the IPDET journey in 2001.

The new partnership that you have in IPDET 2.0 has even further gravitas in that the universities concerned bring substantive evaluation experience and capacity, marks renewal, whilst building on the indelible and unmistakable global IPDET brand. As a former IPDET instructor for many years, I have direct experience of how the course is received, and meet alumni across the globe in various forums who talk with pride about being an IPDETer, as they now work in ministries and departments building oversight systems – backed by an amazing IPDET network.

You have been privileged to participate in this program and reaching this badge of honor tonight – graduation night – you have been re-inscribed or newly minted as an evaluator in a global converted program. You have shared your experience in a dynamic program, and built collective wisdom and knowledge which in the years to come will remain indelible and practical as you can draw on who you met as participants, who you now call friends.

This new consortium resonates very much with my own thinking and the direction being taken by the IEO through its high-profile National Evaluation Capacity building series, known as the “[NEC](#)”, a United Nations ship that has and continues to travel across the globe, energizing UNDP geographic regions that span 170 countries and territories, about the value and virtues of evaluation. The UN sees evaluation as a tool to improve the quality of people’s lives, by aligning promise and intent with practice across the full spectrum of its interventions, through over 100 UN agencies and related programs. The NEC ship has also gathered momentum from its maiden voyage in the Arab States in Morocco, from a modest 50 participants, to move every 2 years to another region – and has now sailed full circle and shall return to the Arab States in October 2019, for round 2. The journey has touched participants from almost the full membership of the UN – close to 180 countries, reached 1000s, engaged academia, civil society and the professional networks.

Evaluation is critical to the attainment of the [SDGs](#), and the United Nations Evaluation Group has made it a priority, to put evaluation on the agenda – to build capacity – so that governments can report their progress at the [high level political forum](#) – some 40 countries to date – and move from a description of monitoring data to an assessment of tangible changes on the ground.

The IPDET and our National Evaluation Capacity Conferences are complimentary and whilst they work separately in structure and form, are two very significant global initiatives that build evaluation capacity and professionalism. I found that the new IPDET 2.0 curriculum focus on more south, new challenges, and a larger spectrum of target groups resonating with our own thinking on the NEC.

The IPDET brand lives in thousands of graduates, each of who is uniquely and collectively a link in the IPDET chain – a chain that girds the globe. In our testing times, it is the much-needed professional anchor to keep to the craft and principles, to remind the principals that we are mission driven, and that evidence must trump ego and loud voices in the performance discourse, and that when there is a challenge we raise our arguments, not our voices.

How better to be able to raise the arguments when you are a professional evaluator, with the skills, evidence and experience?

This evening, I have chosen to talk about the “values” in evaluation, as I believe that in the context of fluidity, noise, rough winds and seas, it is the anchor that keeps the chain connected, and if not addressed can lead to us becoming unhinged in the future.

As evaluators, we ascribe value, we make a professional judgment on past performance which is necessary as part of a diagnosis, to improve the future.

The **Wilton Park** dialogue which the IEO hosted recently focused on just that – [revisiting independence, objectivity and the critically reflective role of evaluation for the SDG era](#). We make judgment, we need to be comfortable with it, and will have confidence if we are properly insulated from influence, have the right reporting lines, budgets and power. One cannot be credible and claim to be serving an accountability call if one is reporting to the evaluand; one can only be credible and serve accountability if one is reporting to the oversight structures of the evaluand – board, councils or parliament. The IEO has been successful in enjoying structural, budgetary, behavioral and managerial independence, and its work helped by its own IEO Brand, a strong and the high demand for its work.

It helps that the Administrator [Achim Steiner](#) has affirmed independence and the IEO in his statements, and uses evaluation for steering the UNDP. It also helps that the IEO has an [Evaluation Advisory Panel](#) (EAP) in place to advise its work, an [Audit and Evaluation Advisory Committee](#) (AEAC) to engage with, and a [Board](#) that approves its budget and program of work.

The performance question is very political, and with declining resources and active citizenry, more governments are being called to account than ever before to justify their existence. The stakes are also higher around results in this period, as are the politics. We need the credibility to conduct the work and show that indeed we have a sound value proposition, and must take as a constant that our work is often about “causing good trouble”.

The billions and trillions wasted across the globe would have helped global humanity had evaluation been more independent, robust with a more singular focus on ensuring public and corporate sector accountability. More inequalities would have been addressed, and through the democratic ethos that evaluation draws on and promotes, the values of the UN to which we all subscribe, would have been better adhered to.

We must recognize that measuring compliance is not necessarily about measuring performance, as we all know that any accountability system can be gamed. We have seen it with the various crisis across the globe.

This is what distinguishes us from other oversight professions, even though we may not always have the space and recognition, we deal with power, and do not need to be obliged to validate it. We can

ask any questions. I thus caution that whilst technical skills are important, there is a very fundamental distinction we must have – and that is to be less of a careerist, to be loyal to the evaluation policy, the first identity of being an evaluator – and then a staff member of the organization.

Our job is to build the evaluation bridge for transparent and accountable conversations between the world of the political and its related leadership, and their statements of what will or has happened, and the reality of the inevitable discrepancy between policy and result; we show up discrepancies.

It is here that the pushback comes, whose evidence, whose truth, and in this heated furnace of evaluation communication we can emerge stronger and better forged if we have good methods, are coherent in explaining ourselves as a profession. It would be much more useful if we logically follow on, that if evaluation is a judgment, it is about accountability and learning.

With great power comes great responsibility. Our armor and ammunition is then the principle, for which to engage with the principals. I share a few of these for reflections.

1. The principle of exercising the right to judgment, independence for transformation

I started my professional evaluation life rather naively 23 years ago as the Director of South Africa's first M&E Directorate, tasked to set up the country first M&E Directorate to ensure land reform was successful.

It was in the era of Mandela, the first democratic administration, new policies and new dreams, at a time when the euphoria of the country was high and we all thought that good policies and with new leaders was ideal to dismantle the apartheid order and its censorious structures, with the question of land, and all that was needed was sound M&E systems to track progress and ensure that land reform happened.

We started from scratch, developing systems to get and penetrate opaque administrative systems, more difficult with the land question where 100s of years of colonialism and apartheid created a geo-spatial order that no amount of policy or good will could dismantle.

The value we worked with was - [evaluation for transformation](#) - to bring about change, to show citizens how progress was being made and to hold accountable an administration, that was built on racism and prejudice, fear and darkness.

I recall the contestation, the sidelining of the function within the department when senior voices were not happy with the messages, and when methods were questioned as a way not to improve, but to dilute.

We are now listening to voices in the evaluation world who say that independence is not important, that units needs to support learning. I am not sure when evaluation became a primary teaching function, if so it should be in the HR units of organizations and not seek to claim being part of oversight.

The definition of evaluation is to make a judgment, to generate a dialogue about performance in order to move forward and improve.

2. The value of being self-reflective and seeking critique to keep us honest

Independence comes with responsibility, and this means the obligation to seek wise council. Who evaluates the evaluators? Obviously, it cannot be the evaluand if it is set up to given judgment. However, there needs to be an overarching view of the work of evaluators, and this could be in the form of periodic peer reviews. I would suggest that a more effective mechanism would be to have an evaluation advisory panel ([EAP](#)) – which I set up in 2013 at the IEO and which provided my office with the collective wisdom of the best evaluation and development minds in the world. Their task was to:

- do quality assurance,
- methodological guidance,
- strategic directions and
- development perspectives

We benefited from all our work being critiqued, a better vocab, able to key into global debates and discussions given the members' own formidable experience, and gain confidence in how we did our work. We just completed a 5-year review of the work, and found that whilst progress has been made, more needs to be done, and that doing evaluations at scale and speed was necessary, but it is essential to manage the quality. It is here again that the question of methods comes in – how we conceptualize and craft our evaluations, how we frame the issues, ask the questions, which criteria to use, what is the evaluation process, how we engage with draft results, debrief, give the right to respond, bring in the political and write recommendations.

3. **The final value is that of communication**

The cost of poor communication is much more than we imagine. The wrong messaging at the wrong time, not recognizing language nuance, being unable to articulate in simple language what we do – is often why many evaluations do not get delivered on time to the right audiences.

We all know about Eval-phobia?

It is real that the very words monitoring and evaluation resonate with deep seated fears in the human brain, evoking memories of school and university days, and causing psychological and physiological tensions. Whether we like it or not, or can control it or not, we often evoke negative sentiment, emotions and inevitable defensive behavior.

I have invested time with my IEO team engaging in getting us all exposed to brain science, how the other side receives, what the emotions are – and there is much we can learn. I have heard many evaluators take the stance that any feedback is defensive, and then pull out the yellow or red card, labelling the evaluand as being defensive and not listening to the virtues of knowledge, refusing to be enlightened by the all-knowing and omnipotent evaluators.

We have a difficult balancing act – and I would thus suggest deep reflection by evaluators of their own communication capability – written and verbal; – these are not soft skills and cannot be discounted as unimportant. If we invest in more engaging evaluation process, and obviously still holding to the principles of independence, we can engage more effectively.

We must train to see ourselves, and whilst we are often critical of others, my professional experience as a manager in many contexts has shown me that evaluators can learn much on how to listen better, respond with more empathy, and build credibility through greater rapport.

In conclusion, I know the value of dinner and drinks, and celebrating graduation, and will thus not stand between this fact and you. I congratulate you all again, and wish you well as you continue to do the right things, what is right, cause good trouble when you need to, keep to the principle, and with evaluation help us all create a better work towards Agenda 2030. Safe travels, the re-inscribed and newly minted IPDEters 2018!

IMPORTANT LINKS

-  [UNDP Evaluation Policy](#)
-  [2017 Annual Report on Evaluation, UNDP](#)
-  [Proceedings from the National Evaluation Capacity Conferences \(2009, 2011, 2013, 2015\)](#)
-  [Bangkok Principles on National Evaluation Capacity for the Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#)
-  [National Evaluation Capacity Conference 2017 – Keynote address by Ms. Michelle Gyles-McDonnough, Director, Sustainable Development Unit, Executive Office of the Secretary General at the United Nations](#)
-  [Wilton Park Report on Independence, objectivity and the critically reflective role of evaluation for the SDG era \(April 2018\)](#)
-  [Book: Evaluation for Agenda 2030 – Providing Evidence on Progress and Sustainability](#)
-  [Evaluation and Independence – existing evaluation policies and new approaches](#)