

EVALUATION THROUGH THE LENS OF BRAIN SCIENCE: Building a humanized approach for better results

This session “Evaluation through the lens of brain science: Building a humanized approach for better results” was structured as a talk between Dr Indran A. Naidoo, Director of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE), and Dr Srin Pillay, CEO of NeuroBusiness Group. Renata Mirulla, Facilitator of the EvalForward community of practice, moderated the event which also included a Q&A section with lively engagement from the audience.

On Wednesday 22 March 2023, IFAD’s Change, Delivery and Innovation Unit (CDI) and the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) jointly hosted the thirteenth IFAD Innovation Talk to engage in a dialogue about the application of neuroscience-based principles in evaluation to build a humanized approach for better evaluation.

Opening the session, **Gladys H. Morales** introduced the speakers, Dr Indran A. Naidoo and Dr Srin Pillay, and the moderator, Renata Mirulla.

There is scope for applying the principles of social neuroscience investigations to the field of evaluation. Evidence suggests that doing so would likely enhance the transformative potential of evaluation by strengthening evaluators’ resilience, and helping them to find the mechanisms that make policies, programmes and interventions work. Having recognized this untapped resource, the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) has started to apply methods that draw from the field of brain science, and is now working alongside world-renowned keynote speaker, lecturer, author, CEO of Neurobusiness Group, and Harvard trained psychiatrist, Dr Srin Pillay.

By their very nature, evaluations are meant to shine a light on the strengths and challenges that people face. While the goal may be to inspire change behaviour in the people who receive those evaluations, several bodies of research from the biological sciences indicate that the approach taken is often misfocused. Emphasizing weaknesses, flaws, or other shortcomings, or even trying to “fix” the problem has an opposite effect. Moreover, this approach will likely activate the Negative Emotional Attractor, which causes people to defend themselves and, as a result, to close down. Not exactly the desired outcome.

During the Talk, Dr Pillay also explained that people are more likely to reach a destination and appreciate the steps along the way if they are not just told what to do. Being told what to do creates weaker cognitive maps in the brain because there is no figuring out process that contributes to the plan. Furthermore, many studies have also demonstrated that strengths-based performance appraisal motivates people to change and align with goals much more than one that looks at strengths and weaknesses or weaknesses alone. While this does not mean that evaluators should just emphasize strengths, it does suggest that the feedback should highlight the capacity to grow that strength.

Speakers and panellists at the event

- [Dr Indran A. Naidoo](#), Director of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE)
- [Dr Srin Pillay](#), CEO of NeuroBusiness Group.
- Moderator: [Renata Mirulla](#), Facilitator of the EvalForward community of practice
- Presenter: [Gladys H Morales](#), Senior Innovation Adviser, Change Delivery and Innovation Unit, IFAD

“Words conjure emotions, and the word ‘evaluation’ conjures judgement. This calls for a mindset where evaluators must listen with empathy, and where management recognizes that they are working at the service of the organization”

Dr Indran A. Naidoo

“Having a deeper understanding of what is going on in the brain can help us understand both the evaluator and the evaluand. By following certain principles, and by understanding the principles of brain science, we can most likely improve outcomes.”

Dr Srin Pillay

IOE has already begun a process of using the principles of neuroscience. Examples are the new Evaluation Manual [[here](#)], which was co-created and jointly signed by IOE and management – a first in the history of the organization. IFAD also has a new Evaluation Policy [[here](#)], which reflects both independent and self-evaluation, as well as a host of dynamic communication products [[here](#)]. These products demonstrate how it is possible to enhance engagement in a constructive fashion, without undermining the principle of independence.

During the [Live Q&A](#) that followed, the speakers explained that these results are the proverbial tip of the iceberg as IOE plans to bolster the synergetic use of neuroscience-based principles in its evaluative offerings during the course of 2023. For the first time, the Evaluation Manual will have a section on communication and engagement, which will allow to design evaluation modules that help evaluators to engage in a way that brings about the level of dialogue that IOE is seeking. The section will be followed by a virtual on-line training course focused on ensuring impactful evaluative communication, and a subsequent training workshop.

If you are interested in the discussion with the audience, please consult the Q&A report and the event [recording](#) on the [event page](#).

CDI would like to thank the participants for taking part and for making the event such a success and showing how increasing interest and ample opportunities to create systematic approaches for improve global comprehension of progress.

Missed the event? Watch it online!

A recording of the event can be found [here](#).

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If you would like to skip directly to certain sections of the event, the times are listed below:

Time (minutes)	Section
00.00-01.50	Welcome by moderator Gladys H. Morales
01.50 - 21.41	Panel discussion by Dr Indran A. Naidoo and Dr Srini Pillay, moderated by Renata Mirulla
21.41-58.25	Q&A

Innovation for impact: delivering results for the rural poor

The Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) ensures that the entire evaluation function at IFAD follows internationally recognized good standards and practices, and reflects the latest methodological breakthroughs. In this context, IOE plans to test evaluative approaches that draw from the field of brain science.

Social neuroscience investigations are already being used to great effect in the fields of crime, justice, security, child development, education, mediation, health, and social well-being and social cohesion. Stemming from this success, IOE recognizes that there may be scope for further growing and expanding this use, to apply it to the field of evaluation. Evidence suggests that doing so would likely strengthen evaluators' resilience, help them to find the mechanisms that make policies, programmes and interventions work, and enhance the impact of their communication efforts.

The event aimed to answer the following questions:

- The fields of neuroscience and evaluation in development contexts would appear unrelated. What prompted IOE to recognize a potential synergy between the two?
- Can the application of neuroscience-based principles improve evaluation processes?
- Can communication approaches to evaluation that encompass neuroscience-based principles trigger transformative change?
- Is IOE planning to test the application of neuroscience principles in its work to help to improve the effectiveness of IFAD? What might be some examples?
- What are the benefits of a constructive engagement between the evaluator and the evaluand?
- Why is it important to establish a psychologically safe environment where people feel open to expressing themselves during an evaluation? How can this be done, in practice, considering the constraints we work in and the different cultural and social norms that influence our behaviours? What will be IFAD's core priorities to foster and support innovation?