

# SITRA'S EVALUATION FRAMEWORK



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## Introduction to evaluating impact at Sitra

Sitra is a future-focused fund driven by its vision and strategy. Sitra's vision is that Finland will prosper by building a fair, sustainable and inspiring future that ensures people's well-being within the limits of the earth's carrying capacity. Sitra's continuous foresight and insight work inform the strategy which in turn guides the societal impact Sitra pursues and the focus areas for its operations. Sitra has five impact goals under the current strategy.

Building a fair and sustainable future requires holistic, systemic changes. Systems change at Sitra refers to the simultaneous reform of operational models, structures and their interactions, which are used to create the prerequisites for future welfare and sustainable development. Systems changes are often generated in networks of different activities, actors, and environmental factors and as a combined effect of them, which makes their evaluation complex and challenging. Sitra aims to promote systems changes in dialogue and collaboration with partners and other actors.

Evaluation refers to a *systematic and intentional process of gathering and analyzing data (quantitative and qualitative), to inform learning, decision-making and action*<sup>1</sup>. Sitra has a strong tradition of evaluation activity, with the oldest external, independent evaluations dating back to the early 1970s. Over the decades, the development of Sitra's evaluation activities has been closely in sync with Finnish and international evaluation development and discussion. The purpose of evaluation at Sitra has been to provide reliable, high quality and independent information on results for administrative bodies (such as the Board and the Parliament of Finland) and the public, and to support Sitra's strategic management, operational development and learning.

Sitra's impact evaluation has been developed in recent years to complement Sitra's other monitoring and auditing activities. In 2016, an approach to impact evaluation was adopted in response to increasing discussion on the importance of measuring impact, accountability of public organizations and evidence-based decision-making. The evaluation approach described here updates the 2016 evaluation approach. The update is based on the results and lessons learned from previous impact evaluations, changes in the international evaluation landscape and paradigm – including the 2019 updates to the OECD/DAC criteria and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020, which also led to a broad new perspective on the role of evaluation.

Sitra's approach to evaluation supports the development work that has been done to strengthen strategic management and impact thinking and practice. This update takes a more holistic approach to impact evaluation, based on the recognition that systematic information and analysis of the entire impact chain (IOOI) – resources (Input), activities and outputs (Output), outcomes (Outcome) and long-term impact (Impact) – is needed to underpin impact management and evaluation. An outline of the implementation plan and medium-term evaluation plan have been prepared to support the approach to evaluation. The three components form the evaluation framework for Sitra.

# Evaluation and impact evaluation in times of change

## New paradigm for evaluation

The achievement or non-achievement of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (for instance, the negative impact of Covid-19 on the above-mentioned development goals and other complex problems,) crystallises a new paradigm of evaluation, which emphasises the transformative power of evaluation and the dynamic nature of evaluation<sup>2</sup>. There is growing recognition in the international debate on evaluation that it should be part of the change pursued, a change agent in its own right. The role of evaluators is also to analyse incremental change, to identify incremental impacts and anticipate the impacts of major change. In particular, evaluation emphasises the need to assess the significance of change, as not all changes are equally relevant in terms of society's development. In the broader interpretation of impact, a key difference with previous impact evaluation is that statistical significance of the change and impact is no longer the main focus (cf. RCT evaluation), but evaluation must also be able to capture indirect effects, which can be negative or positive, as well as unexpected or unintended effects. Sitra's work as a catalyst for experimentation and new models emphasises the need for evaluation to identify and capture all impacts produced.

## Evaluation criteria

Sitra's evaluation, especially its external and independent impact evaluation, is based on internationally recognised evaluation standards, norms and criteria. In 2019, the OECD DAC revised evaluation criteria, in particular updating the Impact criterion to better reflect a broader understanding of impact. It explicitly refers to impact as a profound and significant long-term social change. Impact is also an essential part of the assessment of unintended impacts and, for example, negative impacts.

Another important change in the OECD criteria was the addition of the new criterion of coherence. This focuses on both internal and external coherence. The former looks at how synergistically the different internal activities of the organisation support the impact objectives. The latter focuses on coherence (added value, complementarity and compatibility, cost effectiveness) with other external organisations and actors working in the same sector and/or on the same phenomenon. Complementarity is also a key impact criterion for Sitra's impact, as Sitra acts as a promoter, innovator and catalyst for systemic change, always in co-operation with other actors. This is well illustrated by the concept of "Sitra's niche", which has become well-established in Sitra's language in recent years to describe its strategic choices and the relevance of activities in relation to the operating environment.

While not part of the official OECD criteria, there has been an increasing attention to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the recent evaluation discourse and as part of the programming and evaluation norms and standards. These values are acknowledged as critical for a more transformative evaluation, especially bearing in mind the Leave No One Behind pledge.

## Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the role of evaluation

Since early 2020, the pandemic has influenced international evaluation functions and activities in many respects. Evaluation methods often based on primary data sources, shifted during the pandemic largely to virtual and remote data collection methods, and the real-time nature and timeliness of the evaluation results became a key requirement in the rapidly changing, unprecedented Covid-19 environment. In particular, the need for flexibility of evaluation methods took on new dimensions and challenged what were perceived as traditional and often rigid approaches. Also, the ex-post approach (evaluation after the completion of an activity) has been increasingly seen as irrelevant, with an emphasis on learning and *forward-looking evaluation*. While the pandemic has highlighted the need to adapt, there are long-standing trends bubbling under the surface, also identified in Sitra's evaluation work, which may more permanently shape and reposition international evaluation and take evaluation towards a more transformational direction.

## Transformational evaluation

Transformational evaluation refers to the potential of evaluation to understand, analyse and accelerate change. Evaluation plays an important role as a change agent because its users include businesses, the public sector, research communities and the civil society. Sitra's role as a catalyst of systems change also requires evaluation to be transformational. Sitra's impact should increasingly be evaluated through levels of change and the impacts that Sitra contributes (see below on Sitra's different levels of evaluation in relation to the strategy and target levels). In a complex and "post-normal" world, the transformational approach challenges conventional retrospective evaluation. While future problems are rarely solved based on prior data alone, Sitra's evaluation aims to strike a balance between retrospective and forward-looking evaluation<sup>3</sup>.

Evaluation must take into consideration the operating environments, development trends and the systemic and interdependent and connected nature of the changes so it can produce information that can be used in decision-making and strategic management (cf. utilisation-focused evaluation). In Sitra's evaluation work, foresight knowledge will be used more explicitly and deliberately, and future orientated nature embedded in surveying the operating environment, baseline situation analysis, preparing the theory of change, evaluation frameworks and the recommendations of the evaluations. Sitra has long been an important pioneer in evaluating *future-oriented work*, including internationally. We participate in the international evaluation development discussion and platforms (such as the Association of Professional Futurists Evaluation Task Force 2021–2022) and integrate future orientated nature work and foresight more and more closely into transformational project planning and evaluation.

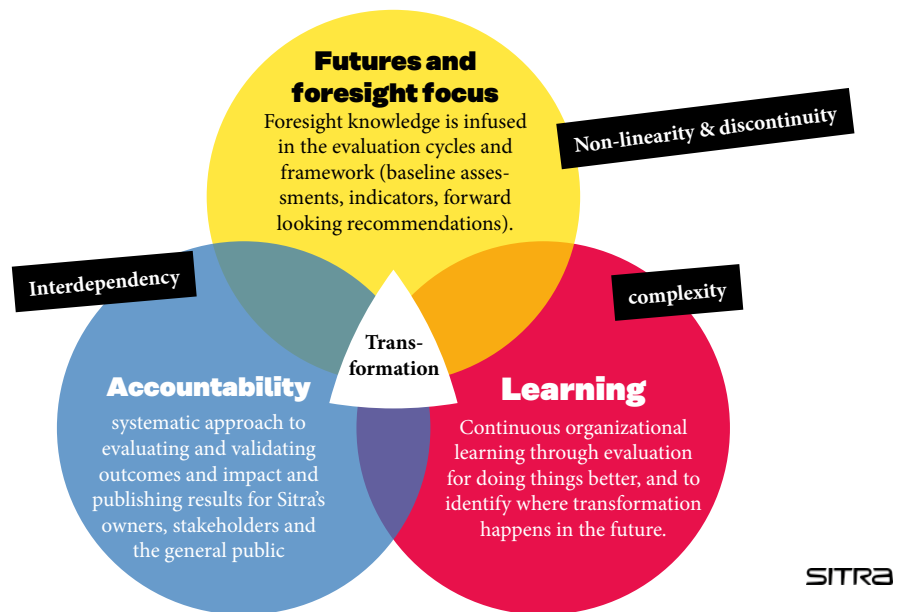


Figure 1: Elements of transformational evaluation at Sitra.

## Overview of Sitra's evaluation developments and lessons learned

While Sitra's evaluation work dates back to the early years of its existence, since 2016, Sitra has moved more towards systematic external and independent impact evaluation<sup>4</sup>. Before this, the focus of evaluation was on programme and project evaluation, regular overall organisation-level evaluations (2002; 2011) and internal audit and self-evaluation. Between 2016 and 2021, Sitra published seven impact-focused evaluations on key operating areas (impact goals)<sup>5</sup>, and a synthesis evaluation in 2019. These evaluations have been useful for planning and management of operations, and the results and recommendations of the evaluations have been extensively used in Sitra's strategy work and development of operating methods. Methodologically, however, the impact evaluations could only partially rely on systematic and long-term monitoring data, which meant that the monitoring and evaluation of the projects' performance was yet to optimally support at Sitra-level the analysis and external evaluation of impact. Hence the need to further strengthen the evaluability of Sitra's programming, and thereby the methodological rigour of impact evaluation. In its 2019 statement, the Parliamentary Working Group also emphasised the need for a systematic basis for Sitra's evaluations.

**Evaluability** refers to reviewing or assessing the evaluation readiness of operations in relation to how credibly and reliably the evaluation can be carried out. In the planning phase, evaluability review usually focuses on the clarity of the theory of change and targets, indicators and implementation plan viz. the causal relationships (output-outcome-impact model). The evaluability reviews/assessments in the middle and end of the project cycle often focus on the finalisation of the actual evaluation methodology and framework. The aim is to make the evaluation results and recommendations as relevant and useful from the user's point of view and to make the evaluation methods more cost-effective, timely and appropriate. Evaluability assessments also support the development of systematic knowledge base of the whole project life cycle and clear evaluation practices. Closely linked to improving evaluability is the development of self-evaluation tools and evaluative thinking across the organisation. At Sitra, evaluability is mainly examined internally through collaboration between the evaluation team and programme/project specialists, but for more complex projects of a larger size or importance, it can also be carried out through external, independent evaluation<sup>6</sup>.

**Enhancing the use of evaluation findings and learnings.** While past impact-focused evaluation findings have been used to inform programming and strategy development, Sitra will focus more on engaging broader audiences and stakeholder groups in the utilization and dissemination of evaluation results as well as using evaluative evidence for sensemaking and learning for action.

# Sitra's strategy-driven nature and its impact on the evaluation of operations

The impact goals specified in Sitra's 2020 strategy describe the kind of societal transformation Sitra pursues. Sitra's strategic management and project work practices were developed in 2020–2021 to ensure that impact thinking systematically guides the planning and implementation of societal transformation. The projects and their transformation-describing outcome goals, related indicators and data collection are designed to support common impact goals. This will facilitate Sitra's operation's improved evaluability and more robust evaluation at both outcome and overall impact level. From an impact evaluation perspective, it is unrealistic to expect external short-term evaluation teams to offer a comprehensive in-depth analysis based only on retrospective data collection and analysis.

Sitra's strategy and the IOOI model supporting it (Figure 1) guide the evaluation framework and questions. The evaluation focus is on the impact and outcomes generated and Sitra's role and contribution in delivering change. Sitra's evaluation practices cover all of the levels of the impact model (see Figure 1). The formulation of the evaluation questions is guided (but not limited) at different levels by the key questions outlined in the OECD evaluation criteria.

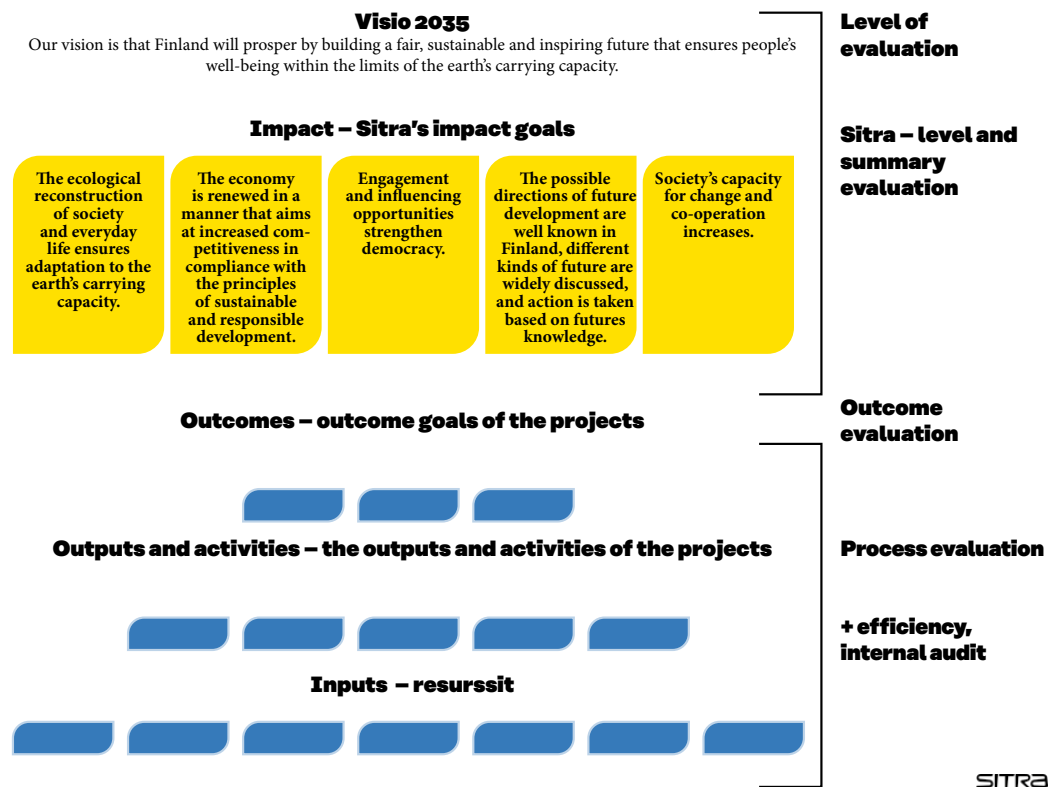


Figure 2: Sitra's evaluation activities in relation to the impact model.



## Impact evaluation

The impact evaluation starts with Sitra's impact goals. They describe the broad changes that are desirable in society over the long term. The changes are systemic in nature, and typically arise as the outcome of activities by multiple actors and measures. Systems change is rarely linear, predictable, and fully controllable by any actor. Impact evaluation emphasises the need for approaches and methods that are interactive and flexible and take into consideration the interdependent nature of the operating environment and operations. Impact evaluation largely depends on mixed methods approach, where Sitra's contribution to the impact goals is verified through the IOOI model. Sitra's impact evaluation is described in more detail [in this article](#), illustrating it with a case study.

## Outcome evaluation

Outcome evaluation focuses on progress in achieving the intended results during the review period: Has the project/activity produced the desired outcomes? What unintended, positive or negative outcomes have occurred? These questions contribute to the requirements of accountability and performance accountability. Sitra's projects and on-going operations teams have detailed outcome goals, describing the concrete changes pursued and with indicators verifying the change. In order to evaluate Sitra's societal impact, it is essential to understand and verify the outcomes through which Sitra promotes systems changes and to verify Sitra's contribution and importance, namely the impact goals towards the Sitra vision. Impact evaluation relies on methodologies such as contribution analysis, various statistical/experimental methods, outcome harvesting and outcome mapping. Outcome-level evaluation at Sitra is mainly carried out in projects and as part of impact evaluation.

## **Process evaluation and developmental evaluation**

Process evaluation helps to better understand how an intervention works, with less focus on the outcomes and more on the processes that lead to results. Often focused on the input-output ratio, process evaluation can also be used to support impact evaluation to increase the understanding of how impacts are generated. Process evaluation is close to the developmental evaluation approach in that it is guided more by the principle of learning than accountability. Process evaluation is done when there is a need to better understand how operations can be developed to improve performance or to better understand how outcomes are created.

For developmental evaluation the starting point is more clearly in learning – the evaluation process as such aims to develop operations and promote learning. Sitra's evaluation process is part of the transformation and closely connected to driving and promoting change. Developmental evaluation is well suited to participatory evaluation in an unknown, complex environment, and it emphasises flexibility and quick, ideally real-time, feedback loops to programming. At Sitra, the developmental evaluation approach is applied in a comprehensive and cross-cutting way in both project and impact evaluations.

## Principles guiding Sitra's evaluations

Sitra aims to be a forerunner in evaluating impact at the national and international level. Sitra's evaluations are guided by the following principles:

### **Impact and outcome timespan and timeliness of evaluation:**

Sitra typically acts in the initial stages of societal transformation as an initiator and accelerator of change. Therefore, the evaluation should consider the timespan during which the outcomes and impact emerge, both from the point of view of identifying the maturities of change and timeliness of the evaluation. Timeliness varies depending on the activity and context, but in general, the most significant societal systems changes happen slowly. The futures orientation of Sitra's operations challenges evaluation not only in terms of timespan but also in terms of the transformational nature described above.

### **Contribution, contextuality and coherence:**

The premise of evaluation is that the outcomes sought by Sitra and the impact indicated as systems change result from the interaction of several factors, actors and stakeholders. Systems change is complex in nature, which challenges the reliability and thereby usefulness of conventional scientific measurement approaches. Therefore, it is impossible to exactly quantify or quantitatively measure the net impact, attribution, of an actor such as Sitra. It is more essential for evaluation to analyse what Sitra's contribution, leverage and added value are, what activities it is worth being involved in, at what stage and for how long (compare evaluation criterion coherence). Evaluation methods need to capture outcomes and impacts that are rarely linear, precisely predictable and controllable in advance, or isolatable to single causes. This must be taken into account in evaluation design and methods. Impact evaluation requires knowledge of the context and ecosystems in which Sitra operates and within which the outcomes and social impact emerge.

### **Balance between learning and accountability:**

Evaluations must support the development and evolution of operations and experimentation with new operating models and ways of thinking and approaches. Sitra's evaluation supports accountability, which, combined with learning and foresight focus underpin the transformational power of Sitra's evaluation activities. Innovative solutions and experiments always involve risk-taking and defining the outcome accurately in advance is rarely possible or meaningful (cf. conventional impact evaluation), but developmental evaluations can influence the outcome and success in achieving impact paths and objectives.

**Openness and transparency:**

As a public organisation, Sitra is already committed to openness and transparency of evaluation methods and results, including sharing and publishing them, while respecting ethical principles. Sitra promotes the development of the Finnish evaluation field and culture, the open access of research data and associated good practices. In line with policy, all Sitra's impact, strategy- and project-level evaluations must be published (fulfilling the quality standards and criteria for evaluation) in a timely manner.

**Methodological appropriateness:**

Evaluation methods have long been criticised for their methodological stagnation. Evaluations must use the best possible methods to answer the evaluation questions reliably (rigorously and credibly). The evaluation approach and methods must be flexible enough so that they respond to changes in the activity and context being evaluated (see previous principles). Systems can have many development directions, and must be able to identify and anticipate. Sitra will continue to encourage methodological innovation by evaluators to respond to new evaluation needs. For example, new data collection methods based on big data or citizen surveys carried out through digital channels (barometers & polls) will enable a more diverse and cost-efficient methodological approach to evaluation. Sitra strives continuously to develop and experiment new evaluation methods, which support ascertaining the outcomes and impact of Sitra's work.

## Endnotes

1 FSG: What is Evaluation, Really?

2 For example, Evaluation for Transformational Change. IDEAS, 2019. Or Van den Berg, Rob D., Cristina Magro and Marie-Hélène Adrien (eds.). 2021. Transformational Evaluation for the Global Crises of Our Times. Exeter, UK: IDEAS.

3 Sitra has used and will continue to use evaluation approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry for organisational development.

4 With a view to Sitra's 2016 overall evaluation, an Advisory Panel of international experts was established for 2015–2016. It was the task of the independent panel to challenge and evaluate Sitra's strategic choices and operating method, support and strengthen Sitra's role and impact in Finland, accelerate Sitra's efforts to develop into one of the world's leading think and do tanks and reinforce Sitra's international networks.

5 <https://www.sitra.fi/aiheet/vaikuttavuuden-arviointi/>

6 *“It is obvious that Parliament and Sitra's management must be able to set goals for this impact and measure their achievement in an objective, sufficiently verifiable and timely manner. This also brings a significant focus to Sitra's management model, especially the development of its access to and use of information. In particular, the evaluation of resources and their use is challenging without such a systematic basis.”*

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## **Acknowledgment**

Sitra would like to acknowledge and thank the following contributors: Thomas Archibald, Henrik Brinkmann, Stefano D'Errico, Annette L Gardner, Hallie Preskill and Petri Uusikylä. Your comments, guidance and wider work and thinking in this field have helped us to refine and develop the evaluation framework.

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