

Greetings from the European Evaluation Society (EES)

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Dear DeGEval members and friends,

On September 20-22, 2017, DeGEval will celebrate its 20th anniversary. The Society will commemorate its remarkable record as well as look forward: The theme of its anniversary conference in Mainz is “Evaluation (in) der Zukunft”. This is a necessary but exceptionally challenging topic. Economic, social, and environmental conditions are in a turmoil throughout Europe. The trade and security partnerships we have long relied on within and beyond Europe are suddenly at risk. Complexity has come to define the operating context. We have moved into an era characterized by volatility and uncertainty. The past is no longer prologue. The immediate and the instant dominate popular perceptions. It follows that the relevance of evaluation will largely depend on our collective capacity to evolve and adapt.

This is why the European Evaluation Society (EES) – just as DeGEval – is in the process of clarifying its future role and focus. We wish to take a fresh look at our on-going activities and initiatives to ensure that they serve the evaluation community in the best way possible. We propose to focus on issues and activities that add the most value within the global and regional evaluation architecture. Alignment of our priorities with those of national societies is critical. This is why I welcome this opportunity to share some thoughts with you. The tentative propositions I will outline highlight areas where more can and should be done. All these policy emphases point to the importance of thinking beyond narrow silos.

A balanced approach to professionalization. Professionalization was a leading theme in several of the international evaluation conferences held in 2016. But the focus has clearly been on the supply side – the improvement of evaluators’ capabilities. Little attention has been paid to the demand side, i.e. the enabling environment for evaluation shaped by the commissioners, their management practices and the regulatory framework within which evaluations are contracted. Yet these are factors that impact decisively on the substantive focus and, scope of evaluations; the relevance of issues and questions that they address; the choice of evaluation design parameters and tools; the adequacy of budgets and timetables; etc. Such key determinants of evaluation quality are mostly established well before evaluation implementation even starts. Evaluation commissioners and evaluators share the responsibility of determining how, by and for whom evaluation results are present-

ed, communicated, responded to. In operating environments characterized by budget austerity it is not possible to evaluate everything. Tailoring the evaluation agenda through careful selection, prioritization and scoping of evaluations is critical to secure meaningful results. Evaluation excellence is not possible if evaluators lack sufficient freedom to adapt evaluation processes to a complex, rapidly changing world. Therefore, a balanced approach to professionalization is needed to improve evaluation standards on both the demand and supply side. This is one of the prerequisites of high quality evaluation in the future. The importance of professional development, education, training, mentoring, and eventually credentialing for evaluators need to be recognized, but a similar effort is needed on the demand side.

Serving the public interest beyond short-term decision making. Evaluation is a public service. It serves by producing valid evidence on the merit, worth and value of results achieved for citizens. This cannot be done credibly without independence. There has been a lot of discussion on how evaluation can best serve policy makers, how results can be better linked to decision making, how decision making should be evidence-based or at least evidence-informed. In a world where the relevance of factual evidence is openly questioned by some decision makers, it is time to stress that power holders are not the sole or even the main audience for evaluation findings. Our legitimacy rests not simply on helping decision makers but rather also on serving citizens, consumers and users of public services. Again, I am not suggesting that improving goal setting, monitoring and self-assessment processes by decision makers is unimportant but is it not time to re-examine evaluation governance structures and processes so that evaluation design, communication and dissemination strategies reach beyond decision makers and serve the public interest?

Partnerships for future evaluation in Europe – and beyond. When DeGEval and EES were established 20 and 25 years ago, there were few national evaluation societies in Europe. The number has rapidly grown, and this trend also holds beyond Europe. We have come to a situation where it is essential to think strategically about cooperation and complementarities among the proliferating number of actors. The European Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) have created their own network, NESE. It can serve as a platform to discuss how the VOPEs can best share experiences and work together. All VOPEs share the commitment to improve the lives of all people. Finding concrete ways to do this together, beyond individual VOPEs, will make all of us stronger in facing the challenges of the future. Partnerships are the approach to ensure that evaluation strongly contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals of the Agenda 2030.

On behalf of the European Evaluation Society let me congratulate DeGEval for 20 successful years of diverse and valuable contributions to evaluation excellence.

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