

Evaluation, a driver for democracy and development towards Sustainable Development Goals success in Africa

An increasing worldwide demand for transparency and accountability is driving the development of national evaluation systems. In Africa, countries are at different stages of development with regard to their evaluation systems but they all face a common challenge: building evaluation capacities which produce needed data to support better decisions. There are no “one size-fits-all” solutions when it comes to promoting evaluation capacity and the development of evaluation systems for countries, but there is sufficient global knowledge that has been generated and sustained through practice and networking, and this knowledge can help enhance national evaluation systems.

At a civic level, evaluation can help demonstrate institutional accountability and be the critical link to provide information for citizens to judge and monitor actual performance against political promises. This is particularly relevant in regard to promises of more sustainable and equitable development as reflected in the 2030 Agenda. The pursuit of evaluation is thus supportive to enhancing democracy and development on the African continent.

*Indran Naidoo, Independent Evaluation Office
of the United Nations Development Programme*

Key Messages

- Evaluation is often overlooked as to its capacity to advance democratic values, with philosophy and practice intersecting with democratic principles. Over and above a performance improvement imperative, evaluation has the potential to advance democracy if it is entrenched in institutions responsible for delivering public services, and if it ensures accountable and transparent use of public resources.
- Evaluation culture is growing in Africa, shown by the embrace of evaluation principles across the continent, the growth of professional associations, increased global professional participation in evaluation, and its entry into thought leadership. All this could support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- African countries can benefit from world-wide networking, knowledge and experiences in evaluation in order to build their own evaluation capacities. This will result in sound, credible and efficient evaluation systems that enable informed policy decisions, and bring about the changes their societies are yearning for.

Continental and country integration, through globalization and democratization, challenges classic hegemonies

“**F**OR the last two decades, important social and economic progress has been achieved in many countries, but reducing poverty and inequality remains a fundamental challenge, particularly in Africa. All over the world, democracies are facing greater development challenges while citizens' expectations are higher than ever. A more informed society, driven by innovations and technological development, is now eager to reap the benefits of more sustainable development. Today, political

authority is fragmented and there are multiple actors involved in policy-making. Basic principles for governance, such as accountability, transparency and effectiveness, are no longer concerns reserved for international organizations, governments and national institutions - ordinary citizens are demanding a bigger role in the decisions that affect their lives.

In this setting, a question may be asked: does evaluation strengthen democratic systems? Hanberger (2004) argues that governance, democracy and ►



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► evaluation affect one another in different ways and because these are interdependent phenomena, evaluation affects them simultaneously. Though evaluation is unlikely to bring about democracy all by itself and contributing to making a society more democratic might not be the primary goal, evaluation has implications for governance and democracy (Naidoo, 2016).

Whether an evaluation serves democracy or not depends on many factors: the contextual and political context, the type of evaluation, the institutional and legal framework where it evolves, and the objectives that are to be achieved. Piccotto (2013) highlights that evaluation “is inherently a political activity. It is inextricably confronted with issues of power distribution and rights”. Thus, in order to maintain its objectivity, evaluation needs protection from any attempt of control as well as from pressures and threats that entities, groups or individuals with vested interests might exert.

A growing evaluation culture in Africa: AfrEA’s voice

Despite an uneven, and comparatively lower, engagement of African countries in evaluation practices, an evaluation culture is rapidly expanding across the continent. The African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) reports that the number of formal and informal national evaluation associations in the region has increased from six in 1999 to more than 45 today. With an approach “made in Africa”, AfrEA is promoting strong evaluation practices to support “evaluations that contribute to real and sustained development” (AfrEA, 2017). The Third AfrEA Conference, held in Cape Town in 2004, was particularly important for the region and confirmed that Africa must lead in its own development. AfrEA’s flagship

publication, the African Journal of Evaluation, not only contributes to stimulating intraregional collaboration and strengthening African views on evaluation but it also showcases Africa as an increasingly diverse and dynamic continent.

“to build demand for accountability and use of evidence in decision-making”.

Discussions at AfrEA and other forums point to a growing demand for evaluation and a better relationship between governments and civil society, which continues “to build demand for accountability and use of evidence in decision-making” (AfrEA, 2017). State institutions and development partners are already improving their policies through evaluation evidence; the private sector is using evaluation for business purposes; while civil society and non-governmental organizations are participating in the evaluation process and raising awareness on the use of evaluation as an accountability tool. Nevertheless, the system also reveals important weaknesses on the supply side, such as the lack of planning for the evaluation of policies and programmes, which makes funding difficult.

At the national level, associations and professional organizations are promoting the recognition and integration of evaluation practices and functions in public institutions and policies. The degree of success varies from one to another, but there are some clear examples (such as the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA)) of what these organizations can accomplish with active membership and thought leadership.

Though evaluation is gaining momentum in Africa, strengthening the evaluation ►

► function still requires backup initiatives. Strengthening national evaluation capacities involves creating the institutional and environmental conditions needed to put evaluation into practice; it also implies stakeholders' participation and adopting approaches that fit the national context. Mostly, what is needed are evaluation capacities to produce evidence of whether the policies, programmes and projects implemented to achieve the national agenda are giving the expected results, and determining if these results are equitable, relevant and sustainable.

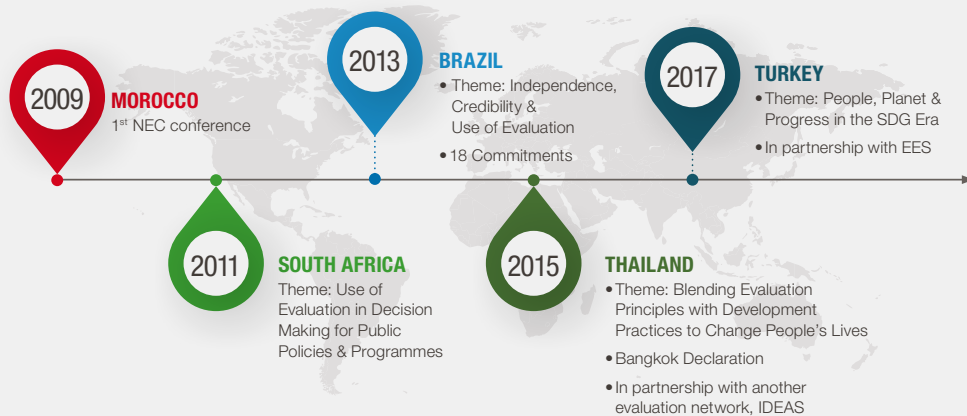
The engagement of Africa with the UNDP NEC series

Over the years, the evaluation community has accumulated a wealth of knowledge in the assessment of development initiatives. Exchanging information, exploring new approaches, sharing innovations, best practices and lessons drawn from past experiences, have become a regular practice among members of the evaluation community.

For the last decade, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been supporting activities to advance an evaluation culture and practice as a tool for accountability and learning. Among them is the National Evaluation Capacities (NEC) Conference series organized by the IEO. Since the first NEC Conference in Morocco, in 2009, the biannual conferences have been an evolving process that have successfully linked theory with practice, vision and ideals with realities (Naidoo and Soares, 2017). One of the conclusions at the 2011 NEC Conference (Johannesburg, South Africa) was that the need for strengthening incentives and capacities, both to produce and use evaluations, is essential. The 4th Conference, in Bangkok (Thailand), adopted a set of 18 commitments to promote evaluation use, define and enhance evaluation processes and methods, engage stakeholders and explore options for institutional structures for managing evaluations. ►►

Timeline of the NEC Conference series organized by UNDP

History & Evolution of NEC Conferences



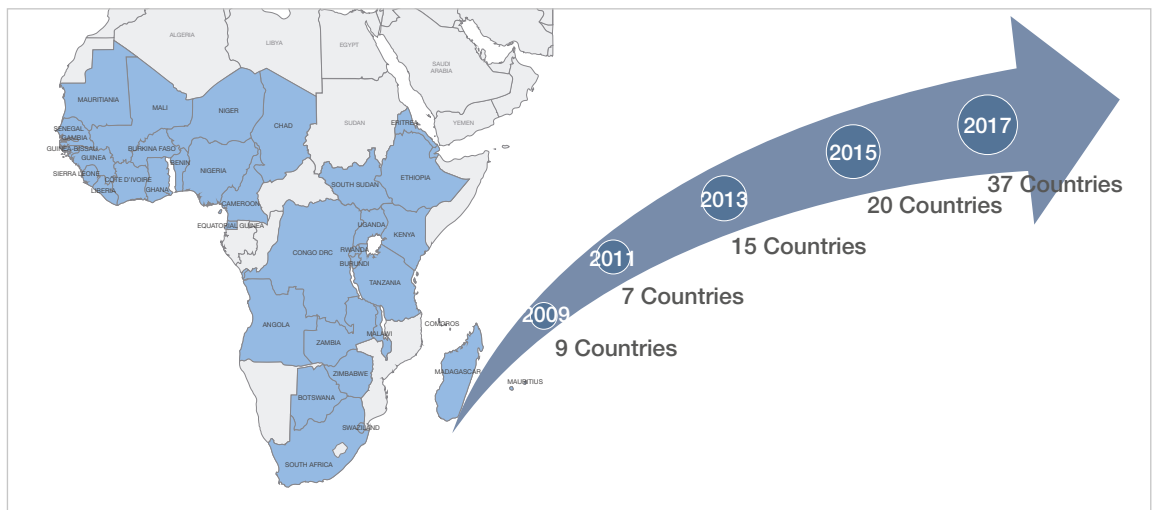
► Since its start, the NEC Conference has grown in participation and scope to become one of the leading events for learning and sharing lessons, innovations, experiences, and perspectives in evaluation. The unprecedented turnout at the last conference, in October 2017 in Istanbul (Turkey), attended by more than 500 participants, illustrates the increasing interest in evaluation. Almost 30 percent of participants from governments and professional associations were from Africa. This wide African representation was possible thanks largely to generous donations from the governments of Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands, as well as the support of partners such as the Independent Development Evaluation (IDEV) of the African Development Bank, which contributed to a bursary programme for African representation. A total of 37 African countries were represented by 111 participants, including 33 women, allowing all attendees to learn first-hand from the experiences of Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya and Liberia, among others. Overall, the event offered a unique opportunity to explore the implications of the SDGs for evaluation and the development of new partnerships.

One lesson learned from the NEC conferences is that government and partner commitment through long-term investment and change is needed to build national evaluation capacities, but can be diluted if they do not set clear goals and follow-up. Varying levels of development in institutional settings and legal frameworks in the countries reflect their different political contexts, government interests and national development progress. These

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are aspects of national evaluation capacities that are complex and linked to each country’s development agenda. Thus, they should be taken into consideration when developing future evaluation agendas (Naidoo and Soares, 2017). ►

African countries participating at the NEC Conferences





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► International engagement to support evaluation for the achievement of SDGs in Africa

There are other international entities who support the strengthening of evaluation to advance effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability in Africa. One of them is the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), an interagency professional network that brings together the evaluation units of the United Nations system, including UNDP. While the evaluation units ensure that the work of their respective organizations help to bring about change in the countries, the UNEG provides guidance, coordination, advocacy and support to the evaluation community.

Likewise, the DAC Network on Development Evaluation, that brings together evaluation specialists from development cooperation agencies of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the Evaluation Cooperation Group (ECG), established by the World Bank and regional development

banks (Inter-American, Asian, European and African), contribute to the exchange of information, experience and cooperation for the improvement of individual skills, encouragement of professionalization, standardization of conceptual frameworks and the search for new evaluation methods.

The 2030 Agenda: implications for evaluation and Africa

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, entails the most ambitious, comprehensive and complex action plan ever put forth, with the objectives to end all forms of poverty, reduce inequalities, and transform the planet in a more prosperous and sustainable world. The new agenda includes 17 goals and 169 targets that are closely intertwined and interconnected, all reinforcing each other. Indeed, the goals are sometimes ambiguous, with no clear indicators, or indicators for data that does not exist yet. Therefore, to achieve them, it ►►

► is imperative to change from a silos approach to develop and adopt a more holistic perspective which involves all sectors of society.

The 2030 Agenda challenges all Governments to build comprehensive follow-up and review systems to track and inform advancement towards the SDGs (United Nations, 2015). Ten African countries (Benin, Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo, Uganda and Zimbabwe) have already complied with the mechanism and presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2016 or 2017. Seven more (Cape Verde, Guinea, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Republic of the Congo and Senegal) will do so in 2018.

Compliance with the 2030 Agenda implies that governments must align their national development strategies and plans with the global agenda and build national monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems that fit their needs. Though the 2030 Agenda calls for country-led evaluations, the link between SDGs and evaluation is still weak at national level (UNDP-IEO, 2017). In 2017, an analysis of the first 22 VNRs (four of them from Africa) found that most reports focused more on monitoring than evaluation (Simon et al., 2017). Although this could be partially explained by the practices inherited from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) era, it suggests that understanding the role that M&E systems play in advancing SDGs still has a long way to go.

Other African initiatives to promote accountability

Assessing progress towards SDG achievement is particularly challenging with respect to Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong Institutions. In a working paper on this, Bolaji-Adio (2015) highlights that

indicators might not be enough to assess progress in the areas of governance, peace and security, particularly when it comes to Africa. He argues that the targets under Goal 16 are “complex, inherently political and country-specific” and that more qualitative assessment tools are essential to measure progress.

***“The 2030 Agenda challenges all Governments to build comprehensive follow-up and review systems to track and inform advancement towards the SDGs.*”**

Initiatives such as the Mo-Ibrahim Index and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) can provide some statistical assessment and in-depth analysis to conduct a credible assessment of progress in Goal 16. By compiling data from multiple sources, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) is the most comprehensive measurement in this area for the region. It aims to provide a detailed picture of governance performance so African citizens can hold their leadership accountable for the delivery of results. The APRM is a more qualitative mechanism designed to foster improved governance through self-assessment and peer review. Together they offer an opportunity to improve a measuring M&E system leading to accountability, learning, effectiveness and socio-economic growth.

The way forward: finding the right balance

Recent studies (EPAR, 2015, UNDP, 2015 and other cited in UNDP-IEO, 2017) have pointed to important factors ►

► that hinder the development of country-led evaluations. These include political use and resistance to evaluation, limited resources, insufficient understanding of the evaluation function, poor data and the fact that the timing and scope of evaluations are not always aligned with the planning and budget cycles. The gaps translate into low quality reports with no practical impact.

There are several lessons learnt that should be taken into account in order to move forward:

- Country-led evaluation on SDGs is a fundamentally political process. “They require a political constituency that assigns value to, demands and supports the use of evaluative information as a legitimate basis for public policy-making” (UNDP-IEO, 2017, p. 12).
- In the absence of a national enabling environment, evaluation capacity development is likely to be both inefficient and ineffective (UNDP-IEO, 2017).
- Conducting high quality and credible national evaluations requires three basic components: a follow-up and review framework, appropriate funding and capacities for M&E, and the development and integration of new evaluation approaches and methodologies. As seen through the NEC Conference and other initiatives, African countries show varying degrees of development in these three components.
- National evaluation systems need to go beyond the numbers and generation of information about performance.

A sound technical evaluation needs high-quality, rigorous, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated data. This type of information combined with relevant evaluative-thinking, ensures a certain quality to the evaluation, but it will not ensure its credibility, neither its use. To be credible, the evaluation process must be independent, impartial and transparent. The use of evaluation in policymaking strongly depends on the quality and credibility of evaluation.

- To add value, a national evaluation system must find a balance between evaluation supply and demand. From the supply side, this means having the capacity to provide sound evidence and evaluative thinking (by producing data, training evaluators, producing reports, providing recommendations, etc.). From the demand side, it implies being able to use the information provided (UNEG, 2012) to influence policy and programme decisions.

Conclusion

There is tremendous potential in the evaluation function and practice to strengthen democracy by helping institutions be more transparent and accountable as well as apply experiences to better decision-making. Evaluation can also help citizens understand if their state institutions are using public resources in the best possible way and if its actions are improving their lives. Whether evaluators, policy-makers and other stakeholders will be able to meet the challenges presented here will depend very much on enabling factors, but above all, it will depend on political will.

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Author's profile

Indran Naidoo is Director of the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Vice-Chair of the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG). Under his leadership, the evaluation function at UNDP has moved toward full independence, enhancing credibility and expansion of scope and coverage. Indran has also held important oversight positions in South Africa. He holds a PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand, a Masters in Geography, West Virginia University (USA), B.Ed. in Curriculum Development (UNISA) and a B.A. (Honors) in Geography and B. Paed (University of KwaZulu Natal). He has participated in Executive Development programmes at Oxford, Harvard, and Wits Business School. He has also published and presented internationally and is a recipient of several awards and scholarships.

