

# Consensus Building and Team Work in Complex Evaluations: Viewpoints from the AfDB's CEDR<sup>1</sup>

*In evaluation field research, consensus building and effective teamwork are essential for various reasons, among which output quality, morale and retention. This article seeks to examine the essence of consensus building and team work in complex evaluations, using the CEDR experience as a case study. The focus is on team members who individually and collectively worked tirelessly to undertake the evaluation successfully.*

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**C**ONSENSUS building and effective teamwork are vital capabilities that are highly valued in evaluation field research. Working effectively as part of a team is important for output quality, morale, and retention. Team work also encourages an innovative spirit and creative ability to generate new knowledge, thinking productively, while increasing one's motivation and enthusiasm to learn and solve problems together (Rousseau et al. 2006). However, these skills do not necessarily happen on their own accord. They need to be fostered, and doing so entails creating a culture that values collaboration. In a team setting, individuals understand and believe that thinking, planning, decision making and actions are better when done cooperatively.

Team work further helps to promote deep learning. This takes place through interaction, problem solving, dialogue, cooperation and collaboration, resulting in the construction of knowledge. The vision of, and approach to, team collaboration and knowledge transmission has similarly changed with the birth of concepts like "learning by doing" (Aldrich 2005), "X-teams" (Ancona and Bresman 2007), and "Theory U" (Scharmer 2007). While acknowledging these innovative approaches, this article will not delve in to them given its limited scope. Rather, the article adopts Scarnati's (2001) conceptualization of team work as a cooperative process that allows ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results. Scarnati (2001) sees team work as a

synergetic process in which the efforts of the group surpasses that of an individual. He argues that interdependence is the distinctive feature of successful teams<sup>2</sup>.

While there is no magic formula to constitute an effective team, research has identified a number of attributes required for successful team work. Central to these are: a) a commitment to team success and shared goals; b) interdependence; c) interpersonal skills; d) open communication and positive feedback; d) trust; and e) commitment to team processes, leadership, and accountability. According to Bennett and Gadlin (2012), trust is among the most critical elements that influence team cohesion (see also Haas and Mortensen 2016; Rousseau et al. 2006). After all, while a group of individuals can team up to work on a collaborative initiative "without having established trust, it is very difficult for a team to continue working together toward a common goal without establishing it" (Bennett and Gadlin 2012: 774). Where trust and mutual respect are the norm, delegating authority is an option likely to be exercised. If trust is low, more active participation – providing greater control and opportunities to influence – is always required. Communication is equally essential and not surprisingly cuts across all the above listed attributes.

Given the centrality of trust to successful collaboration, Gratton and Erickson (2007) argue that "forming teams that capitalize on preexisting, or "heritage," relationships, increases the chances of a project's ►

► success.” The CEDR team members were drawn from the IDEV divisions and partnered with consultants to jointly undertake the evaluation. Viewed from this perspective, it can be argued that some preexisting or “heritage” relationship did exist.

It is within the above context that this article seeks to examine the essence of consensus building and team work in complex evaluations, using the CEDR experience as a case study. The focus is on team members who individually and collectively worked tirelessly to undertake the evaluation successfully. The objective is to demonstrate how team members employed a mix of interpersonal, problem solving, and communication skills to work together toward a common goal. Team work is contingent upon and enmeshed within overlapping and embedded social interactions, communication processes, and field realities. Understanding how team members employed and negotiated these complex challenges rather than focusing on the character of them themselves, should serve to shed more light on the role of their human agency and provide learning and lessons for other evaluators and field researchers alike.

Following this introduction, subsequent section: a) briefly introduces the CEDR exercise and its outcomes; then b) drawing on available literature on evaluation, field research and team work showcases the experiences of the AfDB – IDEV’s CEDR evaluation team. The section also highlights the role collaboration played out within teams, lessons learnt, and how the experiences (individual and collective) mirror, conflict with, or shore up known research findings on the role and import of teamwork in the field; and c) offers some concluding remarks.

## Consensus and Teamwork in Evaluation: IDEV’s CEDR Experience

### AfDB’s CEDR<sup>3</sup>

The Comprehensive Evaluation of the Development Results (CEDR) of the AfDB is an independent, and evidence based assessment of development results achieved by the AfDB over the period 2004–2013. It highlights, among other points, the extent to which Bank interventions have made a difference across Africa. Aside from assessing results, the CEDR draws out lessons and makes recommendations to inform the implementation of the Bank’s new strategic priorities, the High-5s.

The evaluation’s scope covered all the Bank interventions (lending and non lending) approved between 2004–2013. Although to ensure fiscal prudence, the evaluation focused on 14 African countries which, together, accounted for approximately 60 percent of the Bank’s lending portfolio, based on approvals during 2004–2013, and broadly match the composition of the Bank’s portfolio in terms of regional balance, language, fragility and eligibility to the various windows of Bank financing. For each country sampled, an evaluation of the Bank’s Country Strategies and Program (CSP) was conducted. This effort was complemented with 169 Project Results Assessments (PRAs); an imperative since the CEDR was designed as a synthesis of building blocks.

The evaluation favored ratings aggregated across projects and countries – an approach very similar to that utilized by other multilateral development banks – where project level evaluations are employed as building blocks for country, thematic and corporate evaluations. Fourteen country level evaluations were also carried out to reach overall judgments about the Bank’s performance. ►►



► Overall, the evaluation observed that while the AfDB delivered results, it had not met its optimal potential, especially with respect to sustainable outcomes. Nonetheless, it acknowledged that the AfDB's reform agenda – aimed at redefining itself as a results oriented and learning institution – has set it on the right track. In addition, the report pointed out that the Bank should be explicit about its strategic role in member countries; enhance the flexibility of its corporate procedures; frame strategies, programs and projects in a manner recognizing constraints to sustainability; and strengthen its performance and accountability frameworks and processes.

### **Field Experiences and Lessons Learnt**

As part of a concerted effort to harness knowledge and learning, members of the CEDR process were interviewed and asked to share insights on their most

memorable experience, event or activity from CEDR. We wanted to know what inspired them most, and what they were proud of, or disappointed by; we were also interested to know whether they learnt something new or saw something strange and also what frustrated them most? This section captures the voices of team members discussing their involvement in the self assessment, quality assurance and compliance of project evaluation reports, and their participation in field missions.

Central to the CEDR was the need to synthesize the data from each of the Project Results Assessments (PRAs). While a firm was recruited for this purpose, the deadline was tight as a third of PRAs were due by 1st April. Faced with this reality, IDEV's evaluators decided to review the PRAs internally to ensure the quality and conformity of the results of each evaluation prior to forwarding to the ►



► consulting firm for synthesis. The process, amongst others, involved “two colleagues reviewing each PRA, discussing points of discrepancy, and then deciding whether it required further adjustments, was good enough to be included in the evaluation, or whether it should be discarded due to it not measuring up to the standard of a good PRA.” Colleagues reviewing the PRAs had to adhere to following the same logic, so that their comparison would be objective.

The literature tells us that successful team work relies on synergism amongst all its members to create an environment where everyone is willing to contribute and participate. Adopting this approach enables the promotion and nurturing of a positive, effective collaborative environment (Gratton and Erickson 2007). This is exactly what the voices from the field suggest. As one colleague noted, the “atmosphere was one characterized by a mobilization of all hands on deck, and mutual supportiveness.” Another not only revealed that the exercise, “allowed

for extensive interaction with almost all colleagues, and allowed us to get closer creating a more cordial atmosphere,” but that it also led to the development of a “team united, and motivated by the attainment of the common goal, (which ensured that) we managed to accomplish such a task in record time.” It was also pointed out that while the quality assessment process of reviewing the PRAs was new, and put in place specifically for the CEDR, it greatly “enhanced coordination and communication with others.”

Having the right support is another key factor that facilitates team effectiveness (Haas and Mortensen 2016). This aspect comes through visibly in the voices from the field. Members of the CEDR team used phrases such as “cordial atmosphere” and “worked together in a good atmosphere”, all in reference to the enabling environment, characterized by mutual support, trust, and the collaboration that was forged... More importantly, the environment and team dynamics ensured that everyone was on the same playing ►►

► field in terms of information. In addition, there was a lot of peer learning and informal mentoring that the CEDR process nurtured, enhanced and advanced. These developments, however subtle, confirm a widely held view in the literature that “shared knowledge is the cornerstone of effective collaboration; it gives a group a frame of reference, allows the group to interpret situations and decisions correctly, helps people understand one another better, and greatly increases efficiency” (Haas and Mortensen 2016). These traits also mirror Gratton and Erickson’s (2007) findings on collaboration among teams, which states that “appreciating others, being able to engage in purposeful conversations, productively and creatively resolving conflicts” are imperative to forging meaningful team collaboration. As one CEDR member pointed out, “...it was a very rewarding experience, it was the first time I had participated in such an exercise.”

The findings further confirm existing research which points to the fact that collaboration “improves when the roles of individual team members are clearly defined and well understood – when individuals feel that they can do a significant portion of their work independently” (see Gratton and Erickson 2007). To this end each CEDR member knew their role(s) as PRA reviewer, member of a CSP team, and so forth, again confirming Haas and Mortensen’s (2016) point that teams cannot be inspired if they don’t know what they’re working toward and don’t have explicit goals.

In terms of the skills garnered, capacities built, and lessons learnt, team members without fail acknowledged these benefits. Feedback such as “the team work was very interesting because there were invaluable contributions from everyone” and “extensive and trustworthy communication with other internal (AfDB) peer

reviewers helped my team complete the quality assurance process well before the deadline” succinctly express members’ appreciation of, and value for, the exercise. It also speaks volumes about the CEDR process, the learning made possible, and the skills developed.

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This article would, however, not be balanced without any mention of the frustrations, fears, and fatigue faced by, and poignantly captured in the voices of, respondents. Team members remarked that “the deadline was very tight”, resulting in many being stressed. As one concisely put it, “countries on which I was developing CSPES were expecting our inputs, so there was a great time pressure”, and “it was unavoidable to work at night as well as during weekends.” Another simply said “I was overworked.” Yet another pointed out that the “workload was extremely important, although heavy, and punctuated by field missions ...I had a very short window within which to deliver (field reports) on time.” Such tensions are not unique to the AfDB team and are expected when undertaking an evaluation within tight time constraints (Scarnati 2001; Lingard et al. 2012).

Clearly, the voices from the field while shedding light on complexity and ►



► challenges of the field work, also highlighted the resolve of members, and spoke of the personal traits and skills that were enhanced and advanced as a result of the process. Consistently, interviewees articulated a sense of team spirit, mutual collaboration, and respect in their voices. They also emphasized the learning aspect and how team members – singly and variously – improvised in the face of field realities. One colleague best summed up the experience, and pride of the team in the following words: “We were able to deliver the reports ...in a timely manner through team work. The teams of different (IDEV) divisions, different levels, and consultants ... worked together in a good atmosphere. The lesson we learned is that team work pays.”

For any evaluation to be embraced and useful in solutions to complex problems it needs to focus on producing evidence that generates learning; it should not be constrained by the fear of failure. The CEDR experience fulfilled this goal: it is embodied in the vignettes of evaluators’ voices, the ability and determination to rise to the challenge and tackle something new, and it has helped forge new bonds of collaboration within and across IDEV divisions, strengthened existing ties of cooperation, and helped enhance and advance a culture of mentorship, peer learning, and experience sharing.

## Concluding Remarks

Many factors in the field and team dynamics shape the success or otherwise of any complex evaluation. Unfortunately, there is no special method to build a successful collaboration. Some of the characteristics mentioned in the preceding sections

(trust, collaboration, resources, time, leadership, shared expectations, planning, and so on) contribute to achieving the right dynamics and team spirit. This article, while recognizing the importance of the diverse factors, focuses on the critical role the collaboration and consensus building played in the AfDB’s CEDR process. It draws on the voices of the evaluators who were in the field, and the available literature. Its key message hinges on the core CEDR process: a strong sense of the “collective” in terms of trust, team spirit and confidence. Consequently, team members managed to nurture a strong sense of team orientation, trust in each other’s intentions, as well as confidence in, and capacity for collective efficacy.

CEDR team members interviewed used phrases such as “a strong commitment from everyone” and “good contribution from everyone” to characterize their experience. Others, when asked why they perceived the evaluation exercise as an overall success, noted that there was “extensive and trustworthy communication with others”, and that “it (CEDR exercise) enabled us to get closer, creating a very cordial atmosphere.”

These voices from the field, affirm the findings of the available literature on evaluation field research, team work, collaboration and trust (cf. Haas and Mortensen 2016; Gratton and Erickson 2007; Rousseau et al. 2006). Viewed from this perspective, the significance of the CEDR teams’ voice “resides not in its generalisability, but in its resonance, its ability to transport readers to their own team work moments and to produce a sense of déjà vu that signals shared social experience and prompts deep reflection” (Lingard et al. 2012:872).

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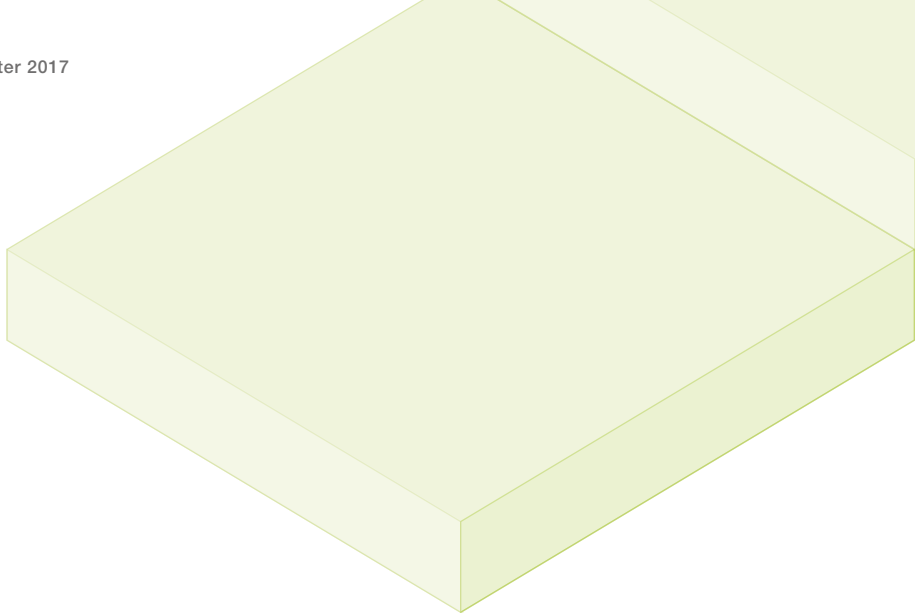


## Endnotes

- 1 IDEV would like to express its appreciation to the CEDR evaluators – Ms. Latefa Camara, and Messrs. Girma Kumbi, Hajime Onishi, and Samer Hachem – for sharing their field experiences and insights without which this article would not have been possible. All misrepresentations, errors, and or omissions are solely ours.
- 2 For more on teamwork, see: Scarnati, J. T. (2001) 'On becoming a team player.' *Team Performance Management: An International Journal*, 7(1/2), pp. 5 – 10. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13527590110389501>
- 3 For more on the AfDB's CEDR, kindly access the full report, including the methodology at: [http://idev.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/IDEV%2C%20CEDR%20Report%20EN\\_web.pdf](http://idev.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/IDEV%2C%20CEDR%20Report%20EN_web.pdf)

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