Interview: Reflecting on the evaluation culture at the African Development Bank
For this edition of Evaluation Matters, we interviewed Armand Nzeyimana, Division Manager, Department for Delivery, Performance Management and Results and Roland Michelitsch, Evaluator General of the AfDB to discuss where the Bank is heading and the prospects for the development of an evaluation culture in the Bank and in Africa in general.

The concept of an evaluation culture has gained some momentum over the last few years, especially with the drive to promote the evaluation of the SDGs. Could you elaborate on what it means for the AfDB?

Armand: As we enter the last decade of the SDGs, the stakes could not be higher for Africa. The progress made is certainly encouraging, but clearly insufficient to put the continent on track to meet most of the targets set for 2030. To make matters even more challenging, climate change, persistent conflict and growing inequalities are undermining progress and threatening to reverse gains made in recent years. For the AfDB, the premier development finance institution of the continent, an evaluation culture is critical to understand how our institutional and collective contributions to the SDGs can be enhanced, and more importantly accelerated. Moving away from business as usual to introduce, test, evaluate and scale-up innovative solutions to poverty reduction requires a strong commitment to organizational learning. It also involves greater tolerance for risk-taking and mistakes as platforms for experimenting and learning. For an institution such as the AfDB, striking the right balance between accountability and learning can be challenging. Both values are essential and complementary outcomes of an evaluation culture.

Roland: For me, an evaluation culture is one that routinely seeks evidence to continuously improve results. Management guru Peter Drucker coined the phrase “What gets measured, gets done.” So what is really important is to have the right key performance indicators (KPIs) that are systematically measured in a good monitoring system, which for me is also part of an evaluation culture. But KPIs can only take you so far. They give you a first indication of what is improving or deteriorating – but an evaluation culture would then take it further and ask what works, what doesn’t – and in particular why, seeking to improve performance. In the context of AfDB and the SDGs, we should ask ourselves how our operations contribute to reaching the SDGs. For some of them, the answer can come from a relatively simple monitoring system – like how many additional people are getting access to power through AfDB projects, or how AfDB projects change a country’s energy mix to become more sustainable. For others, like ending poverty, it is more complicated. We first need to develop a results framework on how we think AfDB activities are contributing to poverty reduction, both directly and indirectly. Such a results chain will be quite complex, and only good evaluation will be able to test the various hypotheses and assumptions behind that results framework. Ultimately, an evaluation culture will constantly seek to better understand how our interventions contribute to meeting the SDGs, and adjusting our policies, strategies, programs and projects to make an even bigger contribution.
What role do you see evaluation playing in contributing to a stronger results culture in the Bank?

Armand: Evaluation is the healthy pause we take from our daily work to take a hard look at what we are doing right, what we are doing wrong, and more importantly why. It examines key assumptions we make when designing programs, processes, policies and strategies to achieve results, challenging the theory of change underpinning our interventions. In recent years, the evaluation function has examined the progress the Bank is making in implementing the new Development and Business Delivery Model, an ambitious and complex reform agenda seeking to revamp our operational model and organizational structure. The evaluation findings provide critical insights on positive change achieved to date, but also provides essential lessons on how to reap the full benefits of this reform program.

Roland: Evaluation contributes in many ways: It helps to close knowledge gaps, where an institution just doesn’t fully understand the effects of its projects and programs, or the factors contributing to or hampering success. It helps to refine strategies, so that they are better targeted to addressing development needs. Evaluations can also address processes, like IDEV’s evaluations of quality at entry and supervision did, so that we can improve work quality and implement better. There are also monitoring and self-evaluation systems, like those for projects (PCRs or XSRs), that are expected to contribute to a results culture – but only if they are considered reliable. Independent evaluation can check such systems, helping to ensure that they contribute to both accountability and continuous learning. Soon we will evaluate AfDB’s results measurement framework, to see whether it is conducive to continuously improving results.

What relationship between IDEV, governing bodies, and Management of the Bank, do you see as being conducive to strengthening a culture of evaluation and results?

Roland: Ideally, all three actors should always be asking how results have been taken into account – in policies, strategies, processes and operations – and even in the AfDB’s organizational structure. Each of the three parties has a different role, which is elaborated in the AfDB’s Independent Evaluation Policy: (i) the Board provides strategic guidance to IDEV and Management, and ensures that IDEV’s recommendations are acted upon; (ii) IDEV recommends a Work Program that is relevant for the AfDB’s needs, carries out high-quality evaluations and disseminates the findings and lessons in a format that is appropriate for the respective audience (be it the Board, Management, or project staff) – and thus helps the AfDB improve; and (iii) Management takes into account the lessons, develops appropriate action plans and adjusts policies and operations to improve results. Between IDEV and Management, it is important to have a collaborative approach – after all, we all want to improve development results for the people in Africa – while at the same time respecting each other’s role: IDEV’s role in providing an independent assessment and broad guidance through its recommendations (e.g., WHAT should be replicated or needs to be improved), and Management’s role in managing and operationalizing the improvements through its actions (e.g., HOW to make it happen).
What about evaluation culture in African countries? Where do you see opportunities to promote this evaluation culture in Africa from 2020? Where are the challenges?

Armand: In the context of ambitious social and economic aspirations aligned to the SDGs and the Africa 2063 Agenda, more and more countries on the continent recognize the need to apply a focused and disciplined approach in evaluating the effectiveness of national transformation plans. The drive to accelerate progress on the SDGs during this next decade provides a unique opportunity to support this effort and promote an evaluation culture across the continent. In particular, there is a growing appetite among decision makers for tracking and evaluating public sector performance as evidenced by the recent interest in setting up Delivery Units at the Center of Government – Presidency or Prime Minister’s Office. Indeed, Delivery Units respond to rising public expectations for faster results, tangible benefits, effective accountability in the use of resources and greater value for money. This is an area where the Bank is taking an increasingly active role in supporting these efforts. The most significant challenge in promoting an evaluation culture on the continent remains poor data quality and weak data management systems, an issue requiring our urgent attention.

Roland: Indeed, African leaders increasingly want to promote an evaluation culture. In part, this is driven by more information flows (citizens have greater information about their own and their country’s situation as compared to others), and growing demands by the people they govern to tangibly improve their lives. So evidence of positive results is becoming more valuable to help them or their parties to stay in power. IDEV has contributed to promoting an evaluation culture in African countries by both stimulating demand for evaluations – hosting the secretariat of the African Parliamentarians’ Network on Development Evaluation (APNODE) for example – and fostering a greater supply of evaluations – by supporting Twende Mbele, a south-south government peer learning initiative aimed at building monitoring & evaluation capacity and sharing experiences. In my experience, it is relatively easier to promote interest in evaluating and demonstrating what works well. Admitting things that don’t work well is usually a much greater challenge – both in the AfDB and on the continent. But learning from failures is also essential for an evaluation culture that seeks continuous improvement.