The paper reflects on the challenges that evaluators sometimes encounter when they conduct development evaluations. The context of the discussion is the author’s own development evaluation experience, particularly in Africa and Asia. The challenges that the project or program funders and implementers bring into the evaluation process include fear of evaluation, contextual detachment of projects/programs, limited resource commitments to evaluation, language and cultural barriers as well as weak or misleading evaluation sensitization to project/program services recipients/beneficiaries and other stakeholders. The major conclusions are that clients who are associated with these challenges have limited knowledge of the essence of evaluation and/or they do not plan and budget for evaluation. The key recommendation is that before any project or program is implemented, the implementers and administrators concerned should undergo training in monitoring and evaluation. This can also be a pre-requisite for anyone to receive funding for any development project/program.
**Introduction**

The discussion in this paper centers on some of the challenges which evaluators often face when they conduct development evaluations. The issues highlighted are largely based on the author’s own experiences in development evaluations in Africa and Asia. The analysis of the issues as well as the solutions that are presented were enriched through discussions that the author had held with fellow evaluators, on the subject, and through the documents reviewed. This is against the backdrop that evaluation is not a ritualistic exercise but a lifeblood of every development initiative. Thus, evaluation is an integral component of every development project/program as it enables one to systematically establish the worthiness, value-addition or transformation brought into people’s lives (Gertler et al. 2011, Lee 1999; Royse, Thyer & Padgett 2006 and Scriven 1991).

**Challenges evaluators often experience**

Reflective analysis was used to conceptualize and synthesize the challenges that are experienced in evaluation as well as their solutions. The key challenges which are presented here focus on the behavioural issues in evaluation that are attributed to a client. In this context, a client refers to the individual or group of individuals who commissioned the evaluation. In other words, this is an evaluation stakeholder whose project or program is being evaluated. The main challenges that are identified are: (i) Fear of evaluation; (ii) Detachment of project/program design from the context; (iii) Limited resource commitment to evaluation work; (iv) Culture and language in data collection; and (v) Sensitization and mobilisation of the evaluation and bias in the selection of participants.

**Fear of evaluation**

Observably, some project or program implementers as well as funding partners generally fear evaluation almost in the same way that some people fear financial audits. Three factors seem to explain this unfortunate fear: (a) the thought that the evaluation findings can turn out negative and can lead to loss of their employment; (b) human behaviour to naturally feel ashamed whenever one performs below the expected level; (c) the perception that evaluation is a highly technical process which very few people in an organization would understand. Together, these three explanations clearly illustrate a distorted understanding of the essence of evaluation. With this kind of evaluation distortion or dislocation, it is likely that project/program administrators and implementers would be interested to see an evaluation report which highlights positive aspects about their project/program (Aucoin and Jarvis 2004). Clearly, the fear of evaluation described here indicates a lack of appreciation of the role of evaluation...
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In development on the part of the program administrators and implementers. In this situation, evaluation or evaluators are normally received with less enthusiasm and cooperation.

To address this challenge, two interrelated solutions can be considered. Firstly, would be to have monitoring and evaluation exposure and skills training for everyone in the organization. The depth of the training content would vary with the levels of people in the organization. Those in the implementation units would obviously require more detailed training than those in the top management. Complementary to this, during the evaluation, evaluators should deliberately include debriefing meetings with the client at strategic points throughout the evaluation process up to the submission of draft report. From the author’s own experience, debriefings reduce or eliminate client’s fear as these become platforms for ongoing feedback and validation between evaluator and client.

Detachment of project/program design from the context

To date, the pattern of resources for development has been that the developed Western countries are the major funders of development initiatives in the developing regions of the world including Africa. This is one explanation for the “cultural rainbow” situations that are often found in project conceptualization, design, and implementation and reporting. If not carefully examined, the project design may suffer a misfit from diverse dimensions thereby reducing the chance to achieve transformative results (Lauring 2008). The misfit or contextual irrelevance is, for the most part, linked to the diverse cultural, religious, economic and political situations as well as the eco-political histories of countries across Africa. Wynn, Dutta and Nelson (2005) emphatically expresses this point when they postulate that “Interventions that are effective in developed countries may not be effective in developing countries that have differing social, economic, cultural, and infrastructure factors that may affect how a project is implemented and the project’s outcomes”.

Again, evaluation experience on community-based programs shows that funding partners and implementers sometimes do not value community entry protocols with indigenous and political leaders. This is evident in that the time allocated to the evaluator to collect data in the communities rarely factors in community protocols. In reality, the evaluator would have to carry out the required protocols anyway but the client may not be willing to adjust fieldwork time, even if some of the protocols are lengthy in nature. For instance, it could be logistically time consuming to get to the traditional leader’s homestead. The logistical challenges may arise from the bad state of roads, or no roads at all, and in that case the evaluator would then resort to travel on foot. Sometimes, the indigenous leaders would require the client to do the protocols or at least introduce the evaluator to them and confirm that indeed the named evaluator is sanctioned to collect data for project/program evaluation in their jurisdictions (Sithole 2016). Honadle (1986: 17) argues alongside this pitfall in community-based evaluation and stresses that “the ability to manage people and resources must be indigenized if a project is to contribute to lasting success”. Chambers (1995) concurs with Honable when he asserts that effective project or program design, implementation and sustainability are quite possible if the people whose lives require the positive change are contextually understood and genuinely involved in the project. In fact, it is argued that projects/programs that have sound contextual fitness are more likely to succeed in achieving theory of change than those which are detached; a view also found in Matunhu (2011).
and Rodney (1972) in their separate landmark analyses of how European colonizers underdeveloped Africa through a systematic process which this author calls 'suffocation of African culture'.

A possible solution to the project/program contextual detachment is for the funding partners, administrators and implementers to conduct a comprehensive contextual analysis to inform design, implementation, monitoring & evaluation, learning as well as reporting. A number of techniques are available to do so which include PESTLE. The technique PESTLE stands for Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental. In brief, the relevance in applying these six pillars of PESTLE in contextual analysis lies in that the analysis of: (i) political situation provides appreciation and understanding of the political dimensions of the country including sensitive issues and what is considered 'political correctness' for a development project/program to succeed; (ii) economic dimension allows one to gain appreciation of how the national economy is structured and functions as well as how that links to the political sphere of the country; (c) social aspects focuses on the normative socio-cultural frameworks in the country that either facilitate or impede positive development; (d) technological situation provides insights on the extent to which the various forms of technology in the country foster or limit development; (e) legal framework is vital to ensure that any development initiative is designed and implemented in line with the attendant laws and policies of the country; (f) environment means that one has to appreciate and understand the broad range of the geo-political parts of the country to include weather patterns, topography and environmental conservation issues and attendant policies. In short, it is important for funding partners and implementers alike to have a good grasp and appreciation of the indicators across these six pillars in a country where a development project/program is to be implemented.

**Limited resource commitment to evaluation work**

Even though most funding partners of development initiatives value evaluation, they sometimes allocate limited resources to it especially money and time. Among the resources that evaluators sometimes find limited are the budget for evaluation as well as the time within which the evaluation has to be conducted. One of the reasons for inadequate funds allocated to the evaluation process emanates from the fact that some organizations do not have a proper plan for evaluation and learning. In this instance, evaluation tends to become an activity on which to spend the budget surplus and not a priority and deliberate undertaking to transform people’s lives. Such an attitude or institutional culture makes it difficult for evaluators because the level at which the evaluation at hand is valued differs between the evaluator and the client.

On the aspect of time as a resource, at times the evaluator is given tight deadlines with unrealistic time allocated to the various tasks in the evaluation process. This usually happens when either the funding partners or the implementers commission an evaluation too late in the life of the project/program concerned. That is to say, evaluation is rushed to meet the timeline before the project/program is officially wound up as per the funding agreement. The late commissioning of an evaluation could be a result of delays encountered during the implementation process some of which could be beyond the control of the implementers. In addition, the delay in commission evaluation could be emanating from the need to buy time to complete pending project/program activities. Generally, Africa is a synchronous
culture where it is not uncommon for people to make time on unexpected events and adjust everything else accordingly. However, the perspective of the Western culture views time as a sequential phenomenon which means that little or no room is given to accommodate the unexpected events (Amponsah 2012). It is possible that when time adjustments are not considered in the event of unexpected circumstances, one way to cope with the situation might be to reduce the sample size of the evaluation and/or the number of data collection tools. Of course, reduction in the number of data collection tools compromises the power of triangulation and by implication, the validity of the evaluation data.

The solution to the challenge above is envisaged in two ways. The first one is to ensure that every development project/program has a proper plan for evaluation with a clearly defined budget. The second one is for funding partners and implementers alike to make concerted efforts to understand how Africans view time in development discourse as this will help in allocating time in the evaluation plan. Most importantly, to also understand how time is valued at various periods of the year in a given country or region in Africa. For example, in Zimbabwe or the Southern African region in general, people in the rural areas value their time for farming during the period October to April. In this scenario, community members are most likely to invest little time with the evaluator if data collection is conducted during this period as they will be busy in their fields.

**Culture and language in data collection**

In data collection, there are instances where the evaluator finds that the evaluation participants speak only in their native languages. On its own, this is not a problem but only becomes a concern if funding partners and/or implementers are not fluent in the native language or they partially understand or write it. In such a situation, it is highly probable that the data collection tools would have been conceptualized and developed in a language foreign to the people from which the data will be obtained. The differential effect of the language and cultural influence of the evaluation design increases the probability of meaning loss during data collection due to translation as well as missing of cultural cues (Adeyemo 2013; Amponsah 2012; Bankov 2000; Harris 1988 and Imberti 2007). This is usually evident during focus group discussions and interviews and the scenario confirms the modern axiom that “The limits of our world are the limits of our language”; an aspect which has been extensively researched and documented by Mpofu-Hamadziripi et al. as documented in Mararike and Vengayi (2016). It can be seen that limited understanding due to language barrier in evaluation tends to compromise authenticity of data and leads to wrong conclusions and recommendations. Related to language challenges, some natives culturally cannot spend a long time (sometimes beyond an hour) with a stranger (the evaluator) as what normally happens in focus group discussions and interviews. In other words, long data collection tools tend to make people uncomfortable.

The possible solution to the above is to ensure that evaluation team

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composition includes some individuals who are fluent in the native/indigenous languages of the people from which data will be obtained. On the culture of short conversations, it is advisable to make data collection tools short especially the focus group discussion and interview guides if the cultural understanding suggests so.

A suggested solution is twofold. On the evaluation stakeholder sensitization, the client should carry out an initial sensitization and in the process introduce the evaluator/evaluation team. The mobilisation of participants should, therefore, be guided by a sampling matrix carefully and jointly developed by the evaluator and the client. It should be noted that sensitization does not mean that the client tells the stakeholders to rehearse their answers to the possible questions the evaluator is likely to ask. When sensitization is done well, it tends to increase evaluator acceptance and promotes cooperation among the stakeholders throughout the evaluation process. Furthermore, when the client takes the responsibility to sensitize stakeholders, a misconception that evaluation is a “witch-hunting” exercise is minimized.

Sensitization of the evaluation and bias in the selection and mobilisation of participants

The final challenge is that some clients think that to prepare and bring together stakeholders in the evaluation process is the responsibility of the evaluator. This is problematic because the evaluator would be limited in understanding the cultural dynamics, logistical details and institutional protocols required. On the selection and mobilization of evaluation participants, the challenge is when a client intentionally selects and mobilises evaluation participants for the evaluator in order to positively influence evaluation findings.

Conclusions and recommendations

It can be concluded that clients who are associated with these challenges have either limited knowledge of the essence of evaluation or they do not plan and budget for it. The key recommendation is that before any project or program is implemented, the implementers and administrators concerned should undergo training in results-based monitoring and evaluation. This can also be a pre-requisite for anyone to receive funding or assistance for any development program or project.

References


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