In a first for the African Development Bank, IDEV held a special series of one-on-one consultation sessions with operations staff entitled "Operations Clinic" during Evaluation Week 2020. The overall aim was to help operations task managers improve the quality of their projects. To prepare for the clinic, IDEV conducted a Bank-wide operations staff survey on project design.

Reflections on the IDEV Operations Clinic: What Way Forward For IDEV To Continue To Support The Improvement Of Operations’ Design Quality?
The operations clinic had a plenary session and three one-on-one consultation sessions with task managers. During the plenary, staff from IDEV and other Bank departments involved in the quality assurance of operations made presentations on prevailing issues with quality-at-entry, lessons on project delays, and the frameworks and tools available to support task managers at the design stage of their operations. It created an opportunity to discuss the role of IDEV in strengthening quality-at-entry, the expectations of task managers vis-a-vis IDEV, and the support services availed by the departments involved in quality assurance of operations. In the one-on-one sessions, IDEV guided task managers on designing operations and helping to ensure that proposed projects meet the Bank’s selectivity requirements, have greater evaluability through enhanced results-based logical frameworks, and sound implementation arrangements including a monitoring and evaluation plan.

What emerged from the survey?

The survey targeted 80 task managers of public sector operations and investment officers of non-sovereign (private sector) operations, with an operation at the early stages of preparation. Thirty-one staff responded to the questionnaire administered. Box 1 below presents key characteristics of the respondents to the survey.

The survey provided a comprehensive overview of the issues faced by operations staff, as well as some insights and lessons. In fact, the numerous initiatives undertaken across the Bank to improve quality-at-entry are paying off.

Box 1: IDEV operations staff survey:

- **Period:** July 29 – August 19, 2020 (22 days)
- **Target:** 80 Task Managers and Investment Officers with current projects at concept note stage
- **Response rate:** 56%
- **Sector:** Work on public sector (65%)/non-sovereign operations (35%)
- **Location:** HQ (52%)/Region (19%)/Country offices (29%)
- **Sector involved:** Financial sector (17%), Agriculture (15%), Energy (13%), real sector* (8%), Transport (8%) Others (39%)
- **Operations Academy:** Have completed (33%)
- **Prior training in project management:** 80%
- **Experience:** Less than 3 Operations (17%)/3-5 Operations. (17%)/More than 5 Operations (66%)
- **Already received support for improvement of quality at entry (QaE):** Yes (40%)/No (60%)

* In the context of non-sovereign operations, all sectors other than finance and trade

Source: Survey data, August 2020
majority of respondents reported that the implementation preparedness/readiness of projects, the identification of beneficiaries, the incorporation of lessons learned and the mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues had improved. At the same time, challenges remain, as also found by IDEV’s Evaluation of the Quality at Entry of Bank Operations in 2018. These include issues with results-based logical frameworks, weaknesses in risk identification and management, workload, deadlines, templates, and directives, norms & standards.

The survey found that only 10 of the 31 respondents had so far completed the Operations Academy Gateway, a recently introduced internal training program to improve the quality of operations, which is mandatory for all operations staff and will soon be rolled out to Project Implementation Units in Regional Member Countries (RMCs) as well. Many task managers and investment officers also did not feel fully informed of recent developments, particularly in the area of sharpening selectivity.

Regarding the technical support requested by operations staff to improve the quality of their operations, ad-hoc training and advice were identified as the preferred channels. Therefore, IDEV developed and piloted several tools during Evaluation Week 2020 that aim to assist task managers and investment officers identify weaknesses and address related issues.

What emerged from the Operations Clinic?

The operations clinic yielded a lot of interest from staff in improving the quality of the Bank’s work. Furthermore, operations staff found the evaluator’s perspective on quality at-entry useful, complementing that of the task manager and implementing partners. One issue that was highlighted during the session concerned start-up delays, which contribute significantly to prolonged disbursements for Bank operations and increase the real and opportunity costs of projects at completion. There is a decision-making tool, the Additionality and Development Outcomes Assessment (ADOA), but participants felt it could be more effective if the feedback loop between ex-ante and ex-post assessments is strengthened. To this end, they suggested to improve the coordination and communication among relevant stakeholders across the Bank.

Another tool showcased during the session was the Gender Marker System - a pivotal instrument for categorizing and mainstreaming gender across operations. While progress has been made in gender mainstreaming, participants recommended that more should be done to disseminate gender knowledge products and results achieved within the Bank and across RMCs.

What lessons did IDEV draw?

The IDEV team concluded that there can be a role to play for evaluation knowledge in helping to improve the quality at entry of Bank operations. However, any work in this area by IDEV should be in close collaboration with the Bank’s Quality Assurance Department, which is leading in this area. The team also learned that the clinic proved to be a much larger undertaking than envisaged. In particular, the initial plan largely underestimated the staff time required to prepare and undertake the clinic.

The way forward?

As the Bank pursues its quality agenda, and IDEV continues to support it with evaluative knowledge, one-on-one operations clinics are a viable tool to provide support to staff at the Bank if set up properly. However, it will need additional human resources or more
Efforts to improve Bank operations are still needed. Debazou Yantio, Principal Evaluation Officer at IDEV who was in charge of the survey and clinic, feels that, although the sessions provided a lot of useful feedback as well as a better picture of knowledge needs, IDEV should not get involved directly in the design of operations. Nor should it carry out staff training to improve the quality of their work. “These are roles that are assigned to other departments,” said Yantio. “Furthermore, doing so may create a conflict of interest and compromise the independence of IDEV” he added.

There are however opportunities for IDEV to support the Operations Academy managed by the Quality Assurance Department by providing knowledge from evaluations that could inform training design. It can also share the tools developed for the clinic, for further testing by various groups of staff involved in project preparation and the quality assurance process. Finally, it can exercise its mandate of promoting an evaluation culture across the Bank by furthering evaluative thinking.

Whatever the scenario, IDEV will be able to use the tools it developed for the clinic to assess evaluable, M&E arrangements, risk management practice, and selectivity of operations and Country Strategies and Programs (CSP) as part of its regular work program of Project Completion Report validations and CSP evaluations.

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**Endnotes**

1. These departments include Gender, Women and Civil Society (AHGC), Macroeconomic Policy, Forecasting and Research (ECMR); Delivery, Performance Management and Results (SNDR); Operations Committee Secretariat and Quality Assurance (SNOQ); and Safeguards and Compliance (SNSC).