Against the backdrop of the global COVID-19 pandemic and with 10 years to go until the target date for the Sustainable Development Goals, the 2020 AfDB Evaluation Week, organized on the theme “From Learning to Transformational Change in Africa”, focused on how effective learning from evaluation is linked to the delivery of sustainable development results. Learning was addressed from the perspective of how organizations learn and how the move from learning to action occurs. Past influential evaluations were explored to get insights into how they helped to shape policies, strategies, development plans and budgets and to lead to transformational change. As a prelude, an Operations clinic was held to sensitize AfDB staff about the quality at entry of operations and the existing tools and technical support at the Bank for project teams; and a Knowledge event to discuss tracking of the SDGs.

**Overarching Takeaways**

- The quality of operations’ design and preparation is an important determinant of the smoothness of their implementation and their achievement of development results.

- Countries’ commitment to putting in place mechanisms for implementing the SDGs is crucial. In tracking progress towards the SDGs, evaluation can usefully complement monitoring. Reliable data is important for both monitoring and evaluation.

- An organization that is open to learning, from evaluation and other evidence, is more likely to achieve transformational development results that contribute to the attainment of the SDGs.

- To be open to learning, there needs to be a culture in the organization, propagated from the top, that it is acceptable to make mistakes. A recognition that not every intervention will be perfect and that there will be shortcomings. A culture that sees shortcomings as an opportunity for learning and for innovation.

- Promoting such a culture starts with the leadership of the organization and cascades down through the management levels to the staff.

- Evaluation, for its part, must be useful to the organization. Evaluations should be relevant and responsive to knowledge needs. The end users and other stakeholders should be consulted and involved throughout the evaluation process. The data, findings and conclusions must be credible. And the recommendations should be practical and actionable. The results of the evaluation should be disseminated broadly, and there should be active outreach to those who are expected to learn the evaluation lessons and apply them in the design and implementation of new interventions, to actively help them learn.
IDEV Operations Clinic

- The 2018 independent evaluation of the Quality at Entry of the AfDB’s operations found shortcomings in quality. To address these, AfDB Management developed a quality improvement plan. As part of this plan, the Bank launched an online Operations Academy in 2019, to strengthen staff’s capacity for quality. Close to 500 Bank staff have attended the academy. The plan is to roll it out to Project Implementation Units in the Regional Member Countries.

- A major cause of project implementation delays is compensation of project affected persons. Clarity should be provided, at project appraisal, on the financial resources available for affected persons.

- New projects that rely on past AfDB projects and those with studies (technical, feasibility) carried out ahead of the Board’s approval are less likely to face project start-up delays.

- The Bank has expertise available to strengthen attention for cross-cutting issues like Gender and Environmental and Social Safeguards. For example, it uses a Gender Marker System to categorize and mainstream gender across its projects. Gender mainstreaming, from project design to completion, is supported by the Bank’s Gender team.

SDG Knowledge Event

- The Uganda Case study showed that strong government commitment is crucial for progress in tracking the SDGs. By developing an SDG framework and establishing an SDG secretariat (in the Prime Minister’s office) and SDG working groups, the government has been able to coordinate the monitoring and reporting of SDGs across institutions and sectors.

- Obtaining quality data for some of the SDG indicators in sectors such as infrastructure, education and environment is challenging. Experience sharing among African countries could help to develop innovative solutions to data constraints.

- The AfDB supported Open Data portal (developed at the request of the AU) has 54 country data portals and 16 regional level data portals. The portal, which provides comprehensive data on African countries for the tracking of SDGs, is also used by other multinational organizations (e.g. IMF, UNICEF, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation).

- Most African countries lack time series data for analysis and reporting on the SDG indicators. There is the need to invest in remote data collection approaches and tools given the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.
How do Organizations Learn?

- Characteristics of a learning organization:
  - A leadership that values learning and demonstrates this to the staff.
  - A culture that allows staff to make mistakes and to learn from mistakes rather than misrepresenting facts.
  - Innovation. Allows staff to identify shortcomings and quickly innovate to address them.
  - Humility and open mindedness. Being aware that it does not have all the answers, and encouraging curiosity and timely response to client needs.
  - Creates enabling conditions for staff learning and links capacity development to career growth. Institutional learning starts with individual learning.

- The AfDB’s Operations departments prepare Management action plan to address recommendations from evaluation reports. However, learning from evaluation does not happen only when a report is discussed by the Board but also during the evaluation process. This calls for strengthened interaction between evaluation teams and operations staff throughout the evaluation process.

- The COVID-19 crisis has been a learning opportunity for development organizations. A learning opportunity for the AfDB to tailor client-specific interventions; and a learning opportunity for the ILO on the importance of maintaining good social dialogue with its stakeholders and learn from peers.
Evaluations that made a difference

- Evaluation is essential to ensuring that the objectives of a development effort are met.
- Leadership plays a key role in influencing the perception of and use of evaluation findings, from Bank Management to the leadership of member countries.
- To enhance the use of evaluation findings, evaluation offices should be strategic on the evaluations they undertake. At the inception of an evaluation, they should carefully review the context that the evaluation seeks to influence.
- Timeliness, relevance and quality of evaluation findings are key factors that have made evaluations game changers. Timing of an evaluation is critical to informing decision making.
The first evaluation unit at the AfDB, set up in 1980, was small and not independent. 40 years later, evaluation has become an integral part of how the AfDB operates. Independent Development Evaluation now consists of three divisions and a front office with over 40 staff, with a distinct mandate to increase accountability, enhance learning and promote an evaluation culture within the Bank and in regional member countries.

- Over the 40 years, the biggest changes observed by current and former evaluation staff members were the growth of the evaluation unit in terms of staff capacity and composition - more women, both younger and more seasoned evaluators - as well as the dynamics in the department, where staff with different backgrounds and expertise work together to produce quality and impactful evaluations.

- Working in evaluation at the AfDB:
  - Is phenomenal. “People from different backgrounds come together and work for the same mission. The work is passionate and I am proud to have participated in the evolution of the department.” - Mohamed Manai
  - Provides great joy. “To be able to interact with people in the field, hear their feedback, and know that I am ultimately helping to improve the quality of life of Africans.” - Joseph Mouanda
  - Stimulates an open and critical mind. “An evaluator must relate to the evaluands to collect information and be independent in order to make observations for all stakeholders.” - Albert Eneas Gakusi

- Looking forward to the next 40 years, it will be important to:
  - Measure and manage the consequences of evaluations, both expected and unexpected, by ensuring they are based on credible evidence.
  - Continue building the capacity of evaluators. They will need to integrate new technologies (AI, Big data), develop innovative data collection tools and perhaps evolve from a purely technical role to more of an advisory capacity.
  - Embrace real-time evaluations. While the evaluation function is retrospective - looking at what happened and learning from it - the biggest challenge is to anticipate what will happen. Evaluation should be able to provide immediate (real time) information for timelier decision-making and implementation.