Lessons for Strengthening a National Evaluation System

National M&E systems are critical in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of national development plans and the SDGs. These national evaluation systems need to be strengthened for more efficiency. This article shares the lessons learned from Ethiopia and Tanzania in strengthening their national evaluation system, an initiative supported by the Finnish Government and the African Development Bank.
Development effectiveness in Africa not only depends on the operations of development partners, but also on those of African governments.

For the past 5 years, the Independent Development Evaluation (IDEV) of the African Development Bank (or, the Bank) has been actively engaged in developing the evaluation capacity of African governments, parliamentarians, and other regional institutions. One of IDEV’s strategic objectives is to promote an evaluation culture in the Bank and Regional Member Countries (RMCs), and encourage a focus on development results, learning and continuous quality improvement. The Bank’s evaluation capacity development (ECD) support to RMCs includes strengthening national evaluation systems, establishing regional networks and communities of practice, establishing evaluation platforms, and much more. These initiatives are in collaboration with other development partners.

Given this is the last year of implementing the project on Strengthening National Evaluation Systems (SNES) in Africa, I wanted to share some of the key lessons that we have learned.

The SNES initiative is a partnership between IDEV and the Finnish Government started in 2014 and providing ECD support to Ethiopia and Tanzania in strengthening their National Monitoring and Evaluation Systems (NMES), which are crucial for accountability, drawing lessons, good governance and improving development outcomes of public investment programs. In several countries, the development of a sound evaluation system has been the focal point of strengthening performance-based budgeting and evidence-based decision-making.

In concentrating on catalytic activities, the project supports four key areas: 1) formulation of a country owned National Evaluation Strategy; 2) development of a National Evaluation Policy and an institutional framework for evaluation; 3) strengthening skills for planning, managing and implementing complex evaluation projects; and 4) implementing an advocacy program to stimulate demand for high quality evaluations.

The overall IDEV approach to capacity development is holistic, incorporating individual, institutional and enabling environments. These catalytic activities are intended to move both countries towards having robust evaluation systems.

The challenges

The scale of capacity development support needed on the continent to improve national evaluation systems is immense. The
Lessons for Strengthening a National Evaluation System

AfDB President Akinwumi Adesina (center).

challenges are formidable. Case studies conducted by CLEAR in 2012 highlight the various challenges—which cut across all African countries—in building national evaluation systems. The key hurdles include: a lack of national policy frameworks for monitoring and evaluation (M&E); a low level of M&E professionalization; inadequate professional capacity for M&E; underdeveloped Internet infrastructure; low quality of data; and uneven utilization of data. These challenges are still valid even in the era of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where countries face four ongoing and interrelated challenges: developing an NEP; building enough individual evaluation capacity; ensuring institutions and processes are in place; and adequately engaging partners. These challenges are dynamic and affect both the supply of and demand for relevant and useful evidence that can inform national plans and policies (IIED Briefing).

The motivation

National M&E systems are critical in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of national development plans and the SDGs. The drive for Ethiopia and Tanzania is no different. There are five key lessons that we have learned to date. They may seem obvious in implementing any capacity development initiative, but it is worth sharing the experience of Ethiopia and Tanzania in their respective context.

Political will and ownership

From preliminary discussions with key stakeholders, the demand for evaluation is primarily coming from development partners whose program or project designs require an evaluation at the end of the program or project. But, this culture is slowly changing.
In both countries, the political will is there, starting from the executive to the implementing ministries, agencies and officers. Since the inception of the project, both countries have undergone general elections, meaning changes of administration. In the case of Tanzania, it brought significant changes, in particular the loss of the original lead national implementing partner, the President’s Delivery Bureau (PDB) - which has since been disbanded - and its replacement by the Planning Commission of Tanzania in the Ministry of Finance. However, this did not lead to the discontinuity of SNES project. Therefore, a key lesson learned is to ensure the right institution takes the lead.

Ownership starts with how demand for the project is identified. The country has to be ready to own the process. Both Ethiopia and Tanzania had evaluation experience to build-on which was critically important for their appreciation of an NMES. But although the implementation of a national development plan is a key motivation, ownership is also rooted in a country-owned NMES system that recognizes the importance of both the supply of and the demand for M&E information, as well as political factors and an enabling environment that will allow an NMES to grow within a country. Our experience to date shows a need to also strengthen ownership within the countries through continuous engagement with national partners, going beyond the central evaluation units to include other government ministries and agencies as well as other local players such as research and training institutions, civil society organizations, etc. They all have a stake at the improvement of the NMES.

Where to Start – the diagnostics

The two countries took a different approach on how they wanted to start the implementation of the SNES initiative. In Ethiopia, we conducted two diagnostic assessments of the national M&E system at both the federal level in 2014, and at the regional level in 2016. Both exercises provided a better understanding of the system in regard to its strengths, capacity gaps, challenges and opportunities for the national M&E system. In addition, both assessments provided inputs and recommendations for the development of their National Evaluation Policy approved by Council of Ministers in 2017. This is one of the greatest achievements of the project thus far. In Tanzania, they opted to build on the “Big Results Now”, or BRN, methodology led by PDB. This is a methodology adopted from the Malaysia’s Big Fast Results. Given the success of BRN’s first year of implementation, the SNES project was to provide support in extending the new M&E methodology across the government beyond the six national key results areas (agriculture, education, energy, resource mobilization, transport and water), bringing Tanzania back on track in her ambition of making the Tanzania Development Vision 2025 a reality.

In retrospect, a full diagnostic or needs assessment at the beginning would have been useful in learning more about the system. In reality, the much needed information about the national M&E system came much later in the scoping mission in 2017.

The use of champions

Find your champions early. These are individuals and institutions who have a keen interest in improving the national evaluation system. The challenge to the lead institutions is to ensure they have the right instruments, processes and incentives in keeping the champions fully engaged. In addition, the lead institutions need to have clarity on how best to use their champions. In both countries, there were periods where it seemed nothing was happening, there was a risk to sustaining the interest and affiliation of the various stakeholders of the system. With hindsight, establishing a Community of Practice, connecting the various M&E professionals, agencies, etc. could have kept this interest and enthusiasm going. Indeed, there were some missed opportunities as this had not been done earlier.
Learning by doing

In addition to trainings, it is imperative to provide opportunities to “learn by doing” through fostering peer learning. This requires greater commitment from the respective individuals and institutions receiving the learning as well as the organization providing the experiences/learning. This must also be cognizant of the transient nature of civil servants, moving from one ministry or government agency to another, which remains a challenge.

I had the opportunity of participating in both the initial diagnostic assessment at the federal level in Ethiopia and primary discussions with the various stakeholders in the national M&E system in Tanzania. It was observed that some sector ministries had strong or weak M&E functions in both countries, which provided an opportunity for peer learning within the country and between the two countries. For example, M&E in Tanzania’s health sector was very strong and they had established creative partnerships in data collection, analysis, and dissemination. To its side, M&E in the Ethiopian education sector was equally strong. Knowledge exchange exercises between these sectors in the two countries would have been helpful. But this learning did not stop only with the two countries, indeed both countries also expressed the desire of learning from other countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, etc., therefore, looking for experiences beyond the continent.

Partnerships

Establish partnership very early in the process. To further support these two countries and additional ones from the continent, requires tremendous resources—financial, human and technical. To meet this need, we are reaching out to other development partners at national, regional and global levels. As a lesson, it is important to ensure that these systems are strengthened and sustainable, therefore partnerships with the following actors is

>
critical: government, civil society, donors, research, academia, private sector, etc. Each has a contribution to make. For example, in skills development, support is needed in tailoring country training for evaluators and decision makers. With peer-to-peer mutual support, employing twinning and south-south cooperation arrangements is key. And with joint evaluations, providing hands-on experience, or learning by doing, is helpful.

Donor partners can also play a stronger role in building evaluation capacity in governments, in particular as donors undertake their program evaluations. In this process, donors could incorporate building evaluation capacity in the conducting of their evaluations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the demand for similar evaluation capacity development support is real. One or two organizations cannot address this demand alone for the continent. It requires more commitment and resources to build national evaluation systems. What is important is to ensure that countries are in the driver’s seat, owning and leading the process, knowing where to start (i.e. having a good understanding of a national evaluation system), identifying your champions, fostering learning, and building effective partnerships.

Endnotes


Jayne Musumba is a Principal Knowledge Management Officer with the Independent Development Evaluation (IDEV) of the African Development Bank Group. Jayne leads the development and implementation of knowledge management activities at IDEV. She also manages the evaluation capacity development portfolio of IDEV, which includes the Strengthening National Evaluation Systems (SNES) in Africa project, African Parliamentarians’ Network on Development Evaluation (APNODE), and Evaluation Platform for Regional African Development Institutions (EPrADI). Prior to joining the AfDB, she had worked within the United Nations in various capacities mainly in the areas of sustainable development, knowledge management, change management, organizational development, capacity development, and innovation. She holds a Master’s degree in Management from the New York University and a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science from Hunter College, City University of New York. See Jayne’s LinkedIn profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/jaynemusumba/.