Context refers to the combination of factors accompanying the design, implementation and evaluation of an intervention that might influence its results. The challenge evaluators have is that interventions implemented in an identical way in different locations will often have different development outcomes. Failure to consider context in evaluations may result in wrong estimations of intervention impact. Conducting contextual analysis increases the quality and strength of evidence and thus provides useful evaluative information to policy makers in Africa.

This article explains how evaluators can conduct contextual analysis in the various steps of the Contribution Analysis Evaluation Methodology to bring validity to the “Made in Africa Evaluation” practice. Theory-based approaches seek to identify and assess any significant influencing factors (i.e., contextual factors) that may also play a role in the causal chain and thus affect the contribution claim. The article posits that evaluators need to recognize and negotiate these contextual challenges effectively to ensure quality evaluation results. Analysis of contextual challenges will act as a practical solution to understanding evaluation findings in Africa and thus help in generating useful evaluative information.
Introduction

There are a number of contextual factors (economic, political, institutional, environmental, security, socio-psychological factors, and the socio-cultural environment) that affect the implementation and the outcomes of an intervention. It is important to consider the influence of contextual variables in African evaluation practice in order to increase evaluation use, give voice to local issues, and explain program effects. Context explains what works best for whom and under what conditions. In addition, it can help to identify which evaluation approach provides the highest quality and most actionable evidence, and gives more direction in the replication and generalizability of findings (Mark, 2001).

In the event that we fail to consider context in Africa where unique contextual factors influence implementation and outcomes, we risk identifying the right questions to frame the evaluation, ignoring key stakeholders who are potentially strong users of evaluation, and misinterpreting stakeholder priorities or even program goals. There is also a possibility of failing to describe the evaluand appropriately, failing to understand the evaluand’s outcomes because the evaluator is unable to notice nuances or subtleties of the culture, and is finally reporting results using means that are only accessible by the dominant culture or those in positions of power (Rog.2012).

Theory-based evaluation methodologies such as contribution analysis are particularly useful for understanding the influence of context on the implementation and achievement of outcomes (Mayne, 2008). This is because contextual variables exert their influence at various stages of the Theory of Change.

The peculiarity of the African context

The African continent is home to countries with mostly unfavourable contextual variables. Some of these contextual variables, such as political instability, are generally unique to Africa and have the potential to impede the implementation of interventions and negatively influence development outcomes.

Gender inequalities persist in most African countries, and data on gender outcomes show a complex canvas of gains and missed opportunities in women’s social and economic development and in their political and legal status (World Development Report, 2012).
Disparities in voice and agency persist—for example, less than one in five members of parliament are women, and in many countries, women suffer pervasive legal discrimination (World Economic Forum, 2018).

In Africa, which contributes relatively low in greenhouse gas emissions and where rain-fed agriculture is the backbone of most economies, the consequences of frequent, severe droughts and flooding are serious enough to jeopardize development efforts (Agbola and Fayiga, 2016), unlike in other continents, and to undermine the successful implementation of interventions.

Africa has tried to pursue economic inclusion, social inclusion, spatial inclusion and political inclusion but cannot compare to Europe and America in these regards. Despite increase in GDP, African growth has been narrowly concentrated in a few sectors and geographic areas (World Bank 2013a). These inequalities may potentially influence the success of development programs.

Although fragility varies across countries in Africa, the major features remain the same: a legacy of conflict, violence and insecurity, weak institutions, poor economic and administrative governance and an inability to deliver public goods adequately, efficiently or equitably (AfDB, 2009). Drivers of fragility include economic, social, political and environmental dimensions, but all too often, demands for inclusion and equity underlie these drivers. As mentioned earlier, the potential threat of these factors to the successful implementation of interventions and subsequent outcomes is generally higher in Africa than in Europe and America.

Analysis of contextual variables

An analysis of contextual factors can often help explain why two identical
interventions may have very different development outcomes in Africa as compared to Europe or America and shed more light on the success or otherwise of interventions.

Contextual analysis may be conducted from a review of the literature, the opinions of stakeholders, a rapid assessment study, or a needs assessment and content analysis during which the target group is consulted (Corner, 2012). It involves asking the broad question “What demographic, economic, community, historical, cultural, political or other sociocultural factors could have influenced the effort’s implementation and outcomes?” Contextual analysis is achieved by asking the following specific questions in the areas indicated below:

The economic climate: Are economic conditions getting better, remaining constant or getting worse? This will, for example, influence the decisions of families as to whether or not they want to participate in any intervention that either requires payments or that promotes present or future income generating activities.

The political climate: Is the local political climate likely to support or undermine the implementation of the intervention?

Organizational and institutional factors: To what extent do local organizations (government, NGOs, and private sector) support or hinder the intervention?

Natural environmental factors: In what ways do environmental factors influence the intervention?

The characteristics of the communities affected by the intervention: How do social, cultural, economic and other characteristics influence how different groups respond to the intervention or are affected by it? How might the needs, problems, constraints, and expectations of the different groups affect the intervention?

The notion of a ‘contributory’ cause recognizes that effects/outcomes are produced by several causes at the same time, none of which might be necessary nor sufficient for impact. In addition and particularly in Africa, contextual variables affect the implementation and outcomes of interventions, which therefore makes contextual analysis a prerequisite in African evaluation practice. Rather than trying to prove attribution that A caused B, contribution analysis seeks to identify the contribution that A made to B, while also giving credit to other influencing factors. The credibility of its findings emerges from the care with which a theory of change is described, tested, and revised over multiple iterations, and the rigour with which an evaluation team identifies, tests, and validates contribution claims. This makes it a good fit for complex policy change initiatives applicable in evaluations conducted by the Independent Development Evaluation of the African Development Bank. It is suitable where the policy initiative being evaluated has multi-components, multiple partners, and is being implemented within a dynamic setting and different outcomes are expected. The following are the proposed six steps for conducting contribution analysis and how contextual analysis may be integrated at each of the steps.

Step 1. Set out the cause-effect issue to be addressed

- What is the outcome and what are the possible contributory factors?
- Acknowledge the attribution problem. At the outset, it should be acknowledged that there are legitimate questions about the extent to which the program has brought about the results observed.
- Determine the specific cause–effect question being addressed.
- What level of confidence is needed? What is to be done with the findings? What kinds of decisions will be based on the findings? The evidence sought needs to fit the purpose.
- Explore the type of contribution expected. It is worth exploring the nature and extent of the contribution expected from the program. This means asking questions such as: what do we know about the nature and extent of the contribution expected? What would show that the program made an important contribution? What would show that the program ‘made a difference’? What kind of evidence would we (or the funders or other stakeholders) accept?
- Assess the plausibility of the expected contribution in relation to the size of the program. Is the expected contribution of the program plausible? Assessing this means asking questions such as: Is the problem being addressed well understood? Are there baseline data?

**Contextual analysis:** What are the key contextual factors influencing the outcome and explanatory variables. In determining the nature of the expected contribution from the program, the other factors that will influence the outcomes will also need to be identified and explored, and their significance judged. Determine through contextual analysis the contextual variables that are likely to have an influence on the implementation and outcome and try to understand the pathways by which they could do it. You need to collect relevant data on the variables and analyze to check to what extent, the variables affected the outcome.

**Step 2. Develop the postulated theory of change and the inherent risks**

The key tools of contribution analysis are theories of change and results chains. With these tools, the contribution story can be built. Theories of change (Weiss, 1997) explain how the program is expected to bring about the desired results—the outputs, and subsequent chain of outcomes and impacts (impact pathways of Douthwaite et al., 2007). But a theory of change needs to spell out the assumptions behind the theory, for example to explain what conditions have to exist for A to lead to B, and what key risks exist to that condition. Leeuw (2003) discusses different ways of eliciting and illustrating these behind-the-scenes assumptions.

- What is the postulated theory of change for the intervention strategy?
- List the assumptions underlying the theory of change.
- Include consideration of other factors that may influence outcomes.
- What are the expected contributions of different players and are these understood? Having established the range of measures required, this help to identify the different players and what was their expected contribution to the strategy.
- Are these expected contributions plausible and feasible to deliver in practice?
- What are the main strengths and weaknesses in the postulated theory of change?
- Set out the initial ‘contribution story’. A short written version of the postulated and agreed ToC, setting out partner contributions, to be produced.

**Contextual analysis:** What are the structure, complexity and dynamics of the intervention? How dynamic and evolving an intervention is, how complex with respect to its theory of change, and the extent to which it blurs with the setting itself has implications for how you choose to design the evaluation. Interventions that blur with...
their broader environment make it difficult to make attributions of change to the intervention because of the number of confounding externalities. It is hard to trace the exact causal mechanism (Rog 2012).

What are the contextual variables that were likely to influence the Theory of Change? At what stages of the theory does each of the identified contextual variables have an effect? What are the possible magnitudes of these effects? It is important to gather data and analyze it to check to what extent the contextual factors could affect the activities, the generation of relevant outputs, intermediate outcomes and final outcomes. You also need to check whether contextual variables could affect the mechanisms at each stage of the Theory of Change.

**Step 3: Gather the existing evidence on the theory of change:**

Evidence to validate the theory of change is needed in three areas: observed results, assumptions about the theory of change, and other influencing factors. Gathering evidence can be an iterative process, first gathering and assembling all readily available material, leaving more exhaustive investigation until later.

Evidence on the occurrence or not of key results (outputs, and immediate, intermediate and final outcomes) is a first step for analysing the contribution the program made to those results. Additionally, there must be evidence that the program was implemented as planned.

Evidence is also needed to demonstrate that the various assumptions in the theory of change are valid, or at least reasonably so. Are there research findings that support the assumptions?

Finally, there is a need to examine other significant factors that may have an influence. Possible sources of information on these are other evaluations, research, and commentary. What is needed is some idea of how influential these other factors may be.

**Contextual analysis:** The evaluator needs to look at the setting of the intervention; e.g., a community change initiative aims to change the community in which it sits. This has a potential effect on the evaluation because if an intervention is being rolled out in different communities, it can look at how it is adapted in those communities. It should examine whether the original theory of change is intact and what factors in the context influenced implementation and outcomes. The evaluator needs to understand the ways in which the broader environment affects the ability of an intervention to achieve outcomes. This is critical to understanding the generalizability of the evaluation findings to other contexts or situations.
Step 4: Assemble and assess the contribution story, and challenges to it:

The contribution story, as developed so far, can now be assembled and assessed critically. Questions to ask at this stage are:

- Which links in the results chain are strong (good evidence available, strong logic, low risk, and/or wide acceptance) and which are weak (little evidence available, weak logic, high risk, and/or little agreement among stakeholders)?

- How credible is the story overall? Does the pattern of results and links validate the results chain?

- Do stakeholders agree with the story—given the available evidence, do they agree that the program has made an important contribution (or not) to the observed results?

- Where are the main weaknesses in the story? For example: Is it clear what results have been achieved? Are key assumptions validated? Are the impacts of other influencing factors clearly understood? Any weaknesses point to where additional data or information would be useful.

Contextual analysis: The evaluator needs to look at each link in the theory of change and try to identify what contextual variable may affect the link and to what extent. The evaluator needs to collect data to validate the possible magnitude of effect of the identified contextual variable on the links in the theory.

Step 5: Seek out additional evidence:

Identify what new data is needed. Based on the assessment of the robustness of the contribution story in Step 4, the information needed to address challenges to its credibility can now be identified, for example, evidence regarding observed results, the strengths of certain assumptions, and/or the roles of other influencing factors.

- Adjust the theory of change. It may be useful at this point to review and update the theory of change, or to examine more closely certain elements of the theory. To do this, the elements of the theory may need to be disaggregated to understand them in detail.

- Gather more evidence. Having identified where more evidence is needed, it can then be gathered. Multiple approaches to assessing performance, such as triangulation, are now generally recognized as useful and important in building credibility.

Some standard approaches to gathering additional evidence for contribution analysis (Mayne, 2001) include surveys, syntheses, case studies, etc.

Contextual analysis: The methods the evaluator uses to gather evidence depend on the available budget, time and data since evaluations often come with constrained budgets, time and data. The evaluator has to decide which of the many possible variables he could measure, will actually get measured. If the timeline for the evaluation is shorter than when you can reasonably expect outcomes to occur, you may need to design an evaluation that checks if you are on track to achieve those outcomes down the road.

Step 6: Revise and strengthen the contribution story:

New evidence will build a more credible contribution story, buttressing the weaker parts of the earlier version or suggesting modifications to the theory of change. It is unlikely that the revised story will be fool-proof, but it will be stronger and more credible.
Contextual analysis: The evaluator needs to understand who the decision-makers are, the types of decision they need to make, the standards of rigour they expect, and the level of confidence that is needed to make the decisions as well as other structural and cultural factors that influence their behaviour. Understanding the decision-making context allows the evaluator to design an evaluation that is more likely to get used.

Conclusion

Africa has a unique context and is plagued by variables such as a fragile political environment, climate change issues, weak institutions of governance and insecurity, which significantly affect the application of methodological approaches to evaluation and outcomes. Attention to these unique variables in evaluation in Africa generates useful evaluative information. Theory-Based Evaluation approaches offer an opportunity for evaluators to conduct contextual analysis at the beginning of an evaluation and at the various stages of the Theory of Change. Ultimately, contextual analysis helps evaluators to understand where, how, why and for whom the interventions worked or did not work and thus improves the quality of evaluations and the learning considerations distilled from them, particularly in African setups.

References


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