Several African countries are in various stages of implementing National Evaluation Systems (NES). One of the key steps in enhancing the use of evaluations is through increasing culturally appropriate and contextually relevant methods. Establishing a National Evaluation System is a critical step in empowering a country to set the rules in order to be able to independently conduct evaluations. African nations have also committed to realize the 2030 Global Development agenda that is enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This article explores the need for the Voluntary National Review (VNR) reporting that is recommended in the SDGs. It also argues that VNR reporting and national evaluation systems should complement one another in order to ensure the relevance of VNR reporting in demonstrating progress in country steps towards achieving their own National Development Plans. Moving towards establishing a National Evaluation System can simultaneously help improve VNR reporting.
Key Messages

- There is a real risk that the drive to achieve international and continental development aspirations through the SDGs and African Union Agenda 2063 becomes a top-down approach that minimizes the importance of national development agendas as they are articulated through National Development Plans. The complexity involved in developing the monitoring and evaluation frameworks and capacities to report against the SDGs and Agenda 2063 can risk attentions being distracted from building the capacity to develop country evaluation systems.

- The Made in Africa Agenda is promising in its ability to circumvent this "top-down" requirement by promoting country-owned approaches through the development of National Evaluation Systems on the demand side, and growing an indigenous curriculum to feed the supply side.

- The Voluntary National Review (VNR) requirements are beginning to illustrate the need to prioritize local evaluation capacity development in order to transfer these indigenous insights into how progress in implementing the SDGs is unfolding.

Introduction: African agenda for evaluations

Evaluation is recognized as an urgent action to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and AU Agenda 2063 at the national, regional and continental levels. Growing evaluation practice through conducting and using evaluation findings is important for African states to see how well they fare in achieving a communal development agenda (Agenda 2063). It is also critical in that governments harness the opportunity to build capable institutions that remain open to scrutiny. The ultimate use for evaluation is to have capable and transparent institutions that provide services to citizens in a manner that is both effective and efficient. Reservations have been raised that indicate that the role of evaluation is still yet to be meaningfully integrated for the SDG Agenda (Simon, et al., 2017; Meyer, et al., 2018). Moreover, there is still room for improvement in building the demand and supply of evaluation capacity on the African continent (Mbecke, 2018; UNDP, 2015).

The African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 the Africa We Want Pan-African vision has seven aspirations: a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; an integrated continent, politically united and based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa’s Renaissance; an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law; a peaceful and secure Africa; an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics; an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children; Africa as a strong, united and influential global player and partner (African Union, 2015: 2). AU member states should align their individual development aspirations with this continental...
vision. The AU Agenda 2063 acknowledges the need for established evaluation systems that gauge outcomes at a national, regional and continental level (African Union, 2015: 18).

Concurrently, the global development agenda enshrined in the SDGs also compels national voluntary reviews, VNR between peers at the United Nations High Level Political Forum annually hosted to report on a set of predetermined SDGs. Table 1 indicates that a growing number of African states have been reporting on their VNRs from 2016 to 2019. Although the VNR focus is on the SDGs, these states should report on how their national development plans and the AU Agenda 2063 are aligned with the SDGs and how the realization of these ideals is evaluated regularly by the states themselves. The significance of this opportunity for maturing country-driven evaluation needs to be harnessed so that evaluation is more meaningfully embedded into government systems for service delivery.

Yet, three years down the line, after the endorsement of the Agenda 2030, little progress has been done in terms of using evaluations and evaluative evidence to inform the VNRs. Some of the key assessments of VNR reports done in 2016 and 2017 in the IIED briefing (EvalParners, UNEG, et al. 2016, 2017) indicate that while M&E systems are becoming embedded within the public administration of reporting countries, there is very little E in the M&E.

Approximately 18 African nations out of a total of 51 countries globally have registered to present their VNRs for the first time, except Sierra Leone, in July 2019 at the United Nations High Level Political Forum on the SDGs. This international platform is important for assessing whether governments are embedding the practice of evaluation into their processes. These same 18 were selected to receive some awareness raising from the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) and initial training on evaluation from the Centre for Learning Evaluation and Results (CLEAR-AA) at the AU in Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia. A key concern raised from the Addis training was the need for countries to have proactive country led processes that also includes VNR reporting (CLEAR – AA, 2018). Although some African countries have begun the process of aligning the Agenda 2063 to their national development plans, the use of evaluation needs to be much more integrated into VNR reporting processes (Meyer, et. al, 2018). The levels of interest amongst participating countries and the expressed need for more tell us about the importance of evaluation capacity development to support countries in building the foundations for stronger evaluation systems so as to be able to increasingly carry these out by drawing on domestic capacity. Doing so will help create the local capacity as well as a source of evaluation evidence to inform VNRs and, therefore, begin to track progress towards the achievement of the SDGs.

Evaluation practice in Africa

For the past decade, numerous interventions have been put in place to grow the demand and supply of evaluations in Africa as a first step towards encouraging a culture of evaluation with an emphasis on teasing out the learning from what evaluations...
offer rather than relying on this form of review primarily as an accountability tool. Sustained political will has been the key driving force in moving away from a donor-driven agenda where evaluations carried out across many African countries have been difficult for state officials to access.

Two key ways of addressing these barriers:
First, building indigenous national evaluation systems that should persuade development partners to work through and with when carrying out an evaluation on programs they are funding in a given country. By setting up the systems that establish guidelines and standards on how evaluations should be carried out, a growing number of African countries have become empowered where the use of evaluations could benefit policy, program and project reviews. Furthermore, NES have been helpful in addressing power asymmetries with development partners to ensure that evaluations carried out in their countries are done on their terms.
Second, and drawing on this first step, building the local capacity to commission and carry out evaluations. The success of building local capacity efforts in a manner that can be institutionalized and sustained over time is reliant on the strength of a country’s culture of evaluation. A shared epistemological framework among country stakeholders, such as civil society, parliamentarians, and Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs), universities, in defining the purpose of a national evaluation systems and the value its serves can help ensure that the machinery driving the supply of evaluators (universities and VOPEs) is structured to meet the nature of demand (largely driven by the state).

Benin, Uganda and South Africa, the first generation of NES, have been pioneers on the African continent, and much has been written about their achievements (Goldman and Porter, 2014; Goldman et al., 2018; Goldman et al. 2019). Benin’s National Evaluation System was established in 2007 and Uganda and South Africa’s were established in 2011. The gradual decentralization of these systems from Central Government agency line ministries and in some instances to provincial or state levels has, over time, shifted the discourse within these public administrations to the importance of sound evidence in informing decision-making around how budgets are allocated and how to steer project and program improvements. There is even a peer learning network amongst these countries, Twende Mbele, which is a country-driven initiative aimed at improving some of the weak spots in how these systems are run through collaborative tool development, such as rapid evaluation assessments or integrating gender more thoroughly into how evaluations are conducted.

A second generation of African countries is evolving in establishing national evaluation systems, such as Ghana, Kenya, Zambia, Niger. Each of these countries have drafted their National Evaluation Policies and have (Niger 2017; Zambia 2019) or are about to have (Ghana 2019) them approved by cabinet as the critical first step in moving towards a country-driven approach to evaluation systems. These countries still have some way to go towards building the culture of M&E evidence use at the line ministry level (beyond Health and Education) or at provincial or state level, let alone shifting attitudes away from fearing evaluations as a punitive rather than learning tool.

CLEAR-AA has carried out some research to try to track how countries are progressing in the establishment of their evaluation systems. In 2018, CLEAR-AA carried out a series of diagnostics across five countries (Ghana, Zambia, Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya) to better understand the nature of how evaluations systems are functioning and where the entry points might be to strengthen evaluation use. These diagnostics revealed that some countries see the value of putting systems in
place to ensure high quality evaluations are done, but there is no pressing need or desire to have these centrally coordinated, as was the case in Benin, Uganda and South Africa. Given the plethora of development actors engaging in capacity building around National Evaluation Systems, such as UNICEF, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3IE), Independent Development Evaluation (IDEV) of the African Development Bank Group, Twende Mbele, and CLEAR-AA, one wonders whether this isn’t an imposed normative framework from outside agencies rather than a home-grown aspiration.

This diagnostic evidence fed into the Compass (2019), a bi-annual tracking tool on monitoring and evaluation developments in the same five countries noted above but with the addition of South Africa. The four dimensions of the Compass look at: (1) the government-wide monitoring and evaluation system; (2) the functioning of parliament; (3) the professionalization of evaluation; and (4) the existence of an enabling environment. The value of the Compass, for CLEAR-AA and the broader Evaluation Capacity Development community, is to gage over time how M&E systems are becoming embedded at a country level. For instance, where there is a growth of Higher Education Institutions offering M&E degree programs, it is an indication that the demand for M&E in the country is strong enough to warrant the investment in skill building and professionalization pathways. We are starting to see good signs on the institutionalization of local capacity building through accredited postgraduate degree M&E programs in South Africa, Benin, Uganda and Kenya, and Ghana.

Sometimes, building this local capacity of evaluators may take a generation to wean countries reliance on “International Experts” flown in from abroad. Nevertheless, if the literature informing the curriculum continues to draw on North American practice and literature, then the reference points for building evaluation capacity in African Higher Education Institutions will continue to miss the point. Efforts to decolonize how evaluation studies are designed are beginning to emerge in exciting ways. For instance, CLEAR-AA’s annual offering of the Development Evaluation Training Program in Africa (DEPTA) has piloted a “Made in Africa” curriculum that has been constructed
by African Evaluation thought leaders such as Zenda Offir and Baguele Chilisa-both of whom are committed to growing indigenous knowledge systems. Furthermore, CLEAR-AA’s partnership with Twende Mbele in building the collaborative curriculum initiative has involved 23 African universities to build a common framework for evaluation studies on the continent. This model is aimed to ensure that amidst the tremendous cultural diversity on the continent, African countries are rowing together in how they build professional pathways for evaluation in academia.

Concluding Remarks

It must be noted that African economies are distinct and at different levels of development. These individual contextual nuances are useful in developing national evaluation systems. This is because unique country contexts are shaped by national development visions that should address their citizens concerns, and the country’s performance monitoring systems should be set up to to track service delivery in a manner that is transparent to the public. Evaluation that is country-driven is capable of increasing the supply of local evaluators and in doing so can begin to embed evaluation practice more meaningfully into government systems. Each African country should be able to communicate to its citizens and to the global community its journey to this ideal, especially in relation to how vulnerable groups are assisted in realizing the same aspirations as their fellow citizens.

References


Laila Smith is the Senior Advisor on Learning in Evaluation at CLEAR-AA at Wits University. She was the Director from 2015 where she served as a member of the Management Committee of Twende Mbele. Prior to engaging in the evaluation arena, Laila worked in international development for twenty years, fifteen of which were spent primarily in the water and sanitation sector in Africa. This involved managing a Regional program on water and sanitation in rapidly growing small towns and informal settlements, driving stronger regulation in the water sector as a Regulator for Johannesburg as well as developing, piloting and scaling up a model on citizens-voice in the regulation of water services. She has published widely on the governance of urban water services.

Angelita Kithatu-Kiwekete’s research interests reflect on public-sector innovations and constraints. She is conversant with gender issues and works to provide strategic, conceptual and practical linkages between vulnerable women in community; she is also interested in policy and development processes, and has published and made presentations in this regard. She has conducted research and has published on the supra, national and local political and economic landscape of the continent. She has a PhD in Public Finance from the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. She is presently a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results, CLEAR-AA/ Twende Mbele.