From experience to knowledge...
From knowledge to action...
From action to impact

eV ALUation Matters

is a magazine from Independent Development Evaluation at the African Development Bank Group. It provides different perspectives and insights on evaluation and development issues.

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About Independent Development Evaluation

The mission of Independent Development Evaluation at the AfDB is to enhance the development effectiveness of the institution in its regional member countries through independent and instrumental evaluations and partnerships for sharing knowledge.

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Introduction

The transformational force of the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the way we work and live, calling into question previously unchallenged notions and ideas, and requiring us to adapt to a new reality. The sphere of development and development evaluation has not been exempt. In this time of uncertainty, the role of evaluation as a guiding beacon, based on evidence, is more important than ever.

The COVID-19 crisis has affected development evaluation in several ways. This edition of eVALUation Matters explores three aspects:

Evaluation knowledge to improve responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and future crises. Africa is in a unique position to learn from crises. What evaluative lessons are there for the wider world? And what lessons can we draw from the past to inform the response to the present pandemic and future crises?

Evaluating the response to COVID-19. How should the interventions by national and local governments, international institutions, and development partners to tackle the pandemic be evaluated?

How evaluation itself has had to adapt to the COVID-19 crisis. How has this disease changed the way we evaluate? Is evaluation adapting appropriately to this pandemic?
From the Acting Evaluator General’s Desk

8 Monitoring and evaluation during a health and security crisis: constraints, adaptation strategies, opportunities, and experiences from the field

Albert Mivo Ndoubé, Plan International, Cameroon and Philippe Ferdinand Onana, Laboratoire des études sociales appliquées au développement durable (Laboratory of social studies applied to sustainable development)

COVID-19 has considerably affected all aspects of social life. The strict implementation of preventive measures has forced humanitarian organizations to review their daily practices to sustain their commitments, especially in M&E. Based on experiences from the field, this article reflects on how M&E practice has shown innovation to maintain minimum quality and accountability standards to adapt to COVID-19 in fragile areas.

18 Evaluations under COVID-19: how the pandemic affected the evaluation of the performance of the Coastal Climate Resilient Infrastructure project in Bangladesh, and what we learned

Roberto La Rovere, Sally E. Smith and Fabrizio Felloni, Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD

Drawing experience from another continent, this paper reflects on the experience of IFAD in conducting a project performance evaluation of the coastal climate-resilient infrastructure in Bangladesh. The team shares how a project’s evaluation methodology and approach were adapted to the challenges and restrictions imposed by COVID-19, including the use of remote interviews, GIS data and imagery to compensate for the international and domestic travel, to using local networks of national team members.

30 Blog: Remote sensing technology minimizes COVID-19 related disruptions in monitoring food security projects

Everline Ndenga, Resilient Food Systems Program, Conservation International

Online and remote sensing tools have ensured the continuation of monitoring and evaluation work despite the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This blog showcases how the Resilient Food System program in 12 sub-Saharan African countries has used these tools to address the challenge of limited time and access for data collection and analysis and a lack of proper interactions to promote the use of information generated from monitoring and evaluation (M&E).
Blog: COVID-19 pandemic responses and evidence use: seizing the opportunity to engender a culture of evidence-based policy making in sub-Saharan Africa

Clement Mensah, Independent Development Evaluation, African Development Bank

As much as the COVID-19 pandemic brought devastating socio-economic impacts in developed and developing countries, there are also opportunities to be seized from this crisis. This blog calls on the broader issue of the government’s commitment to evaluating their interventions and drawing lessons from what works and what does not. In a post-COVID-19 pandemic, it calls on governments to seize the opportunity to invest more in generating and utilizing appropriate and timely evidence.

Blog: The value of monitoring systems in times of a pandemic

Ayabulela Dlakavu, Takunda J. Chirau, and Banele Masilela, Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results - Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA)

The significance of evidence-generation systems cannot be underestimated, particularly their contribution to decision-making, shaping public opinion, and responses to the pandemic. This blog highlights this issue by examining the experience of South Africa during this pandemic.

VOPEs’ Response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa

Mark Abrahams, Southern Hemisphere; and Mokgophana Ramasobana, Tiyimele Consultants (Pty) Ltd., South Africa

Like many organizations, the Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluations (VOPEs) have also been challenged to step up during this crisis period. It has been anticipated that M&E can promote credible evidence to fast-track decision-making processes. This paper reflects on how VOPEs in Africa measure up as Civil Society Organizations to promote the role and value of M&E to generate knowledge for use on interventions responding to the pandemic and their ability to be and remain focused and relevant.

"While the pandemic has reaffirmed the value of evidence use in responding effectively to the socioeconomic impact during and post the pandemic, it has equally spotlighted gaps in evidence-based policy-making practices in the African context."

The world has been dealing with an unprecedented situation, the COVID-19 pandemic, for more than a year and a half now. Finally, there is a glimpse of hope with the development and roll-out of vaccines. However, every day is a race to ensure their wide accessibility and to vaccinate enough of the world population to change the tide of infection rates and deaths.

Undertaking evaluations during this period has presented a set of challenges and opportunities. Evaluators the world over have faced difficulties in conducting empirical data collection and site visits for their evaluations. Local and international travel restrictions resulted in limited access to governments, beneficiaries and partners, and hindered evaluation teams’ ability to conduct face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders. At the same time, widely applied working from home measures stopped physical meetings of evaluation teams and evaluation reference groups. In this environment, evaluators had to be creative and innovative in doing their work, and make maximum use of the resources at their disposal.
The experience of Independent Development Evaluation (IDEV) was no different from that of many organizations in adapting to the new normal. As stated in our 2020 Annual Report, IDEV demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and responsiveness by delivering and remaining engaged and attentive to demands. To address the challenges while continuing to implement its work program, IDEV employed alternatives to the classical in-person methods of evaluation data collection, including virtual and online communication tools to interact with internal and external stakeholders and evaluation reference groups. We also hired local consultants for local data collection. Where feasible, new sources of evidence such as “big data” and geo-spatial data sets were also considered and applied. Many other evaluation offices took similar measures.

As we adapt to and evaluate the new reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Evaluation Matters helps us reflect on what support we can offer to the economies, institutions, and people we serve through development evaluation. In the uncertain context, there is a strong need for credible evidence on what works and what does not, why, for whom, and under what circumstances.

The articles submitted focus on optimism, seeing the crisis as an opportunity to examine what can be done differently and better in development evaluation. In the humanitarian context, M&E practice had to innovate to maintain minimum quality and accountability standards while adapting to COVID-19 in fragile situations. The use of technology such as remote sensing tools also proved its worth in ensuring the continuation of M&E work. In addition, we share an experience from a project performance evaluation conducted on another continent. The coastal climate-resilient infrastructure project in Bangladesh was evaluated using remote interviews, GIS data, and imagery to overcome the challenges and travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic.
The edition also asks whether this is the right time to engender a culture of evidence-based policymaking in sub-Saharan Africa – and what needs to be done to seize this opportunity to invest more in generating and utilizing appropriate and timely evidence. On this, we also share the experience of South Africa in using evidence-generation systems for decision-making, shaping public opinion, and responding to the pandemic. Finally, like many organizations, we learn how VOPEs in Africa addressed this crisis by remaining focused and relevant.

I hope these articles offer new perspectives on how we could turn this crisis into an opportunity for moving development evaluation practice on the continent to the next level, by exploring what technologies could be employed, what knowledge and skills need to be developed or strengthened, and how to create that enabling environment to promote a culture of evidence-based decision and policymaking.

Happy reading!

About the Acting Evaluator General

Karen Rot-Münstermann is the Acting Evaluator General of the African Development Bank. She joined IDEV in 2014 as manager of its Knowledge Management, Outreach and Capacity Development Division, after spending five years at the Bank’s Resource Mobilization and Partnerships Department, where she was among others responsible for coordinating the three-yearly ADF replenishment processes.

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The emergence of COVID-19 affected all aspects of social life. Strict prevention measures forced humanitarian organizations to reorganize their day-to-day activities in order to respect their commitments, not least in the area of monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Drawing on experiences in the field, this article explores how M&E practices turned to agility and innovation to maintain minimum standards of quality and accountability while adapting to COVID-19 in areas already experiencing fragility.
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of social life: health, education, politics, the economy, development, sector policies, and more. To prevent the worst, various governments, with the support of the World Health Organization, introduced so-called barrier measures to slow the spread of the virus. These barriers force individuals and organizations that wished to respect their commitments to reorganize their day-to-day activities. The implementation of humanitarian programs and projects in general and their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) component in particular were not exempt from the phenomenon. At the same time, it is important to note that implementing, monitoring, and evaluating projects during emergencies is nothing new. Time and time again, crises around the world have required a humanitarian intervention to save lives in environments fraught with insecurity and emergencies. This state of affairs has prompted nongovernmental organizations and United Nations specialized agencies to develop guides and manuals for monitoring and evaluating projects during emergencies. Their objective is to “adapt approaches, attitudes, methods, techniques, and tools to the emergency and humanitarian crisis context. This involves taking into account specificities related to context, pace, timeframe, beneficiaries, stakeholders, needs, access, security, and volume—both financial and operational” (Hallé, Mareschal, 2018: 10). The COVID-19 pandemic added a new level of complexity to the implementation of projects and programs in these situations, particularly as regards project M&E.

This article draws on experiences from the field to show how M&E practices have had to demonstrate agility and innovation in adapting to the conditions created by the pandemic in order to uphold minimum standards of quality and accountability, frequently in areas already in the grip of a security crisis (sometimes more than one). The authors used an interview guide to remotely collect primary data on M&E officers’ experiences conducting M&E during the pandemic. The officers gave the authors their informed consent to be cited in this article. Data was also gathered from direct participant observation of officers conducting their daily activities. Secondary data was drawn from the literature. A content analysis produced the coherent set of findings reported here.

Key Messages

- The emergence of COVID-19 has underscored the need for agility and a spirit of innovation within M&E teams.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an additional benefit of secondary data: namely, that secondary data need not be collected directly, and is therefore less risky for M&E teams.
- Despite the constraints, M&E must not compromise its standards for quality and accountability even as it adapts to new and complex ecosystems.
This article begins by presenting M&E practices common in emergencies. It then analyzes the constraints caused by the COVID-19 crisis. The article concludes by presenting the adaptation strategies developed by actors in the field and the opportunities that emerged.

Common M&E practices during emergencies

Emergency interventions can be defined as interventions where the immediate needs of communities affected by armed conflict or a natural disaster must be met very quickly and in an efficient and appropriate manner. In situations like these, M&E practices must be responsive and dynamic. “Research and M&E activities are possible during any stage of a crisis, but different data collection approaches may be appropriate at different phases of a conflict.” (UN Women, 2020). To avoid the M&E system falling out of step with project activities, it is important that M&E take the events that triggered the emergency into account. Among other things, the M&E system must respect the timeframe in which actions can take place. This timeframe tends to be short: in particular, there is often little time for assessing the needs and the context. A good assessment of the needs and the context makes it possible to ensure that the project is sensitive to the conflict and does not produce negative effects or effects that might exacerbate beneficiaries’ vulnerability. The assessment must recognize the precarity of the situation and avoid burdening beneficiaries with collecting a large volume of data or collecting data at a rapid rate. Furthermore, the M&E system must be both flexible and agile, because emergencies require interventions that cross several sectors: this multiplies needs and the number of actors involved. All this takes place in an environment in which access is difficult, movement is restricted, and safety is a concern. Very often, M&E officers set up a data collection system—a system to manage complaints and gather information from beneficiaries—that considers it probable that former systems have collapsed, making them of limited use or absent altogether.

Many organizations operating in these contexts have developed guidelines and manuals tailored to emergencies. Catholic Relief Services (CRS), for example, has developed three standards for M&E in emergencies: “(i) Early monitoring systems are simple, use-oriented and flexible to accommodate change in context and activities; (ii) monitor the relevance, effectiveness, and quality of the response to increase accountability to the people we serve; and (iii) create a formal M&E system for the overall response as soon as the situation stabilizes” (Morel, Hagens, 2012: 5).

Terre des hommes, a nongovernmental organization, has diagrammed the main characteristics of monitoring in the context of emergencies and humanitarian crises (Figure 1). Terre des hommes also demonstrates how monitoring evolves over the course of a crisis (Figure 2).

The elements in Figures 1 and 2 are purely illustrative, since they may vary by organization or context. Nonetheless, the figures show that M&E has different features during a crisis than during normal times. In other words, M&E officers adapt to their operating environment and to constraints in the field.

Covid-19 and M&E constraints during a crisis

The irrefutable need to limit the spread of COVID-19 and prevent further contagion has prompted various organizations to adopt measures that take epidemiological data into account and integrate recommendations by the World Health Organization. In essence, experts advised and continue to advise limiting the size of groups and reducing traditional
physical contact: that is to say, they advise physical distancing. This has translated into such barrier measures as wearing a mask, washing one’s hands regularly with soap and running water, using hydroalcoholic gel, coughing or sneezing in the crook of one’s elbow, etc. Organizations have adopted institutional measures likewise: for example, closing buildings, mandating work-from-home, reducing staff’s working days, rotating work, and limiting activities—not just on site/in the office, but also in the field. Given the current health crisis, all these measures are constraints that seem necessary to accept, all the more so in areas that call for humanitarian aid. This is no less true when it comes to monitoring and evaluating projects. The next section of this paper identifies several constraints to M&E. The list of constraints is far from exhaustive.
Constraints to the quality of project data

Because of how COVID-19 is transmitted, the pandemic exposes the quality of project data to certain risks. First, to ensure that project data is of good quality and matches the data recorded on computer servers, M&E officers often verify the data on paper. But paper tends to be handled by several people. Second, in the context of mobile data collection—collecting data on smartphones and tablets—M&E officers are regularly called upon to handle the mobile devices used to collect project data digitally. For example, data collection agents might ask officers to configure the devices, to manipulate them to resolve technical problems, or to check surveys before their release. Given the prevention measures recommended for COVID-19, should M&E officers systematically disinfect their hands after handling paper and the mobile devices used to collect and validate data?

The reduction or suspension of M&E field activities

COVID-19 caused many organizations to reduce their field activities or suspend them altogether. Both decisions make it difficult to conduct field surveys, supervision missions, evaluation missions, etc. In a technical note,
the International Labor Organization (ILO) noted that “temporary suspensions of interviewing are widespread due to COVID-19 restrictions. Their duration will be variable and quite often unknown. They can refer to the entire sample or only part of the sample” (ILO, 2020: 14). For example, at the RESILAC Project for inclusive economic and social recovery around Lake Chad, Jean Nka'a Ela Ekouet, the manager of monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning for the RESILAC Consortium in Maroua (Agence de développement française Cameroon), noted that the project’s studies were postponed and the medium-term evaluation did not take place.

The lack of timely data

Fewer field trips do not only make it difficult to obtain data on time: they also make it difficult to obtain data of good quality. Without field trips, M&E teams can no longer undergo regular training. A lack of training impacts several aspects of project data, namely its accuracy, its reliability, its precision, its completeness, and its timeliness. In this regard, Cyrielle Effa, officer in charge of monitoring, evaluation, and quality improvement at ACAFEM-Yaoundé, stressed that the main difficulty related to COVID-19 was the suspension of physical contact with teams on the ground. This delayed the provision and collection of data and made it impossible to begin the project with reliable data (inconsistencies, mistakes in the information recorded on forms and in registries).

Fewer in-person meetings and fewer training sessions

Team capacity-building activities were also impacted as restrictions and barrier measures led trainings to be suspended or the format of trainings to be reviewed. For example, the M&E manager of the RESILAC Consortium in Maroua mentioned that the monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning team was not trained in the project tools (BDD, Kobo software) in person but online. As in other projects, the Consortium’s online capacity-building activities and virtual meetings took precedence over face-to-face training.

The effect of a poor internet connection on online activities

As noted earlier, the number of online activities—meetings, training, conferences, and webinars—increased to limit the risk of contagion. But poor internet connections made it difficult to conduct these activities smoothly. Often, interruptions to the internet signal made it impossible for participants to take part in an activity from beginning to end. One commentator noted that a poor internet connection when using Skype meant that coordination meetings were less satisfactory, and follow-up on activities and recommendations suffered as a result.

As the pandemic has continued, barrier measures have remained in place. And M&E officers and their organizations have had to adapt.

Adaptation strategies and opportunities

To continue to monitor their projects’ progress and to assess the achievement of results, M&E officers have had to adapt existing strategies and develop new ones. Notwithstanding the constraints, however, the health crisis has also created opportunities.

A. Adaptation strategies

The concept of adaptation can be interpreted different ways. In one, adaptation refers to the process in which an entity’s new living conditions transform the entity and allow it to respond more effectively to those new conditions (Ricqlès, 2021). The new reality imposed by COVID-19 has required project M&E practices to adapt in this way. Several strategies have emerged as a result.
Remote work

Like experts in other industries, M&E officers have switched to telecommuting. Their use of tools—the telephone, Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, and Teams—has increased dramatically. Working groups have been set up for monitoring activities (mainly on WhatsApp), for evaluation meetings (on Skype, Zoom, and Teams), and to train people online (on Zoom, Teams, and Skype).

Evaluations conducted by local consultants

To carry out certain evaluations while limiting travel, organizations have opted to recruit local consultants instead of international ones.

Collecting data remotely using information and communications technology (ICT)

Collecting data online instead of in situ is a common practice that pandemic-related restrictions have caused to become more frequent still. To collect data online, M&E officers have made greater use of tools like KoBoCollect, Google Form, and MicrosoftForm. By way of illustration, the authors of this article collected data on Google Forms and KoBoCollect for three projects related to COVID-19. It is generally as simple as using email, WhatsApp, or Facebook to send a link to a survey to the target population, upon the receipt of which respondents can use a smartphone, a tablet, or a computer to submit their response. This practice conforms fully to the physical distancing measures recommended to limit the spread of COVID-19. Security risks in areas experiencing fragility have caused programs operating in red zones to collect data remotely as well. As mentioned earlier, it is possible to carry out M&E activities during a crisis, but data collection methods may need to change. The practice is not without challenges, however, especially if the internet connection is poor. In cases where respondents are expected to administer their own submission of digital data—that is, where data is being collected remotely from respondents who provide data autonomously—respondents need a good internet connection to download the data collection form, complete it, and submit it. It should be noted that this option is very demanding when setting up a survey. In these circumstances, the survey questions must be easy to grasp and assimilate.

An increase in rapid evaluations

Rapid evaluations have become more common in areas that are experiencing security risks. UN Women explains why: “In the event of an extreme emergency, the most crucial post-conflict services for the community are the immediate life-saving assistance services. Research activities of a general nature are not necessarily the most suitable; on the other hand, it is possible to carry out rapid assessments and collect routine M&E data, with a focus on achievements and data provided by services” (UN Women, 2019).

Conducting evaluations remotely

Again, to limit the movement of people, and in the absence of recruiting local consultants, many assessments have been carried out remotely. For example, in October 2020, the authors took part in an evaluation, NUPAS Plus, as part of a program in Cameroon financed by USAID with funds from the President’s Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR). The evaluation team was composed of national and international consultants. SustainAbility Solutions Africa, the firm responsible for the assessment, is based in South Africa and the principal consultants did not travel to Cameroon. The methodology for the assessment consisted mainly of interviews (a series of questions and answers administered with a dedicated assessment tool) and the verification of documents and evidence. For this purpose, the evaluation team created a Google Drive account to transfer documents into folders organized
by area of assessment. A checklist of required documents had been shared. Interviews and discussions took place on Zoom and Skype.

B. Opportunities

Where M&E is concerned, COVID-19 created numerous obstacles. But it also created opportunities.

Capacity-building

M&E officers were able to build their capacity to monitor and evaluate projects remotely. They did this not only by practicing, but also with online training such as the webinar entitled “Remote Program Monitoring with CommCare” that Dimagi organized on 21 April 2020. M&E officers also built expertise in facilitating meetings virtually. The pandemic disrupted usual practices, and the increase in the number of follow-up meetings online improved officers’ ability to conduct online meetings and to use special applications. The crisis also made it urgent that M&E officers improve and adapt their practices, knowledge, tools, and procedures for producing high-quality data. That is why training modules emerged with the aim of providing project managers in general and M&E officers in particular with the rudiments and tools they needed to adapt to the context imposed by COVID-19 while continuing to ensure that ongoing programs were implemented satisfactorily.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this article was to evaluate M&E practices in the context of a health and security crisis. To do this, the authors analyzed the constraints, adaptation strategies, and opportunities that have manifested in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that M&E faced many constraints: difficulties in verifying the quality of the data; the limitation and suspension of field visits; failures to receive data on time; fewer face-to-face training and meetings; poor internet connections that made it difficult to carry out activities and collect data remotely. Although some of the constraints have lessened of late, the pandemic has persisted and many restrictions remain. As a consequence, M&E officers and their organizations have had to adapt and develop strategies such as teleworking, conducting assessments with local consultants, collecting data remotely with ICT, conducting more rapid evaluations, and conducting more evaluations from a distance. At the same time, a few opportunities have emerged, notably a better capacity to monitor projects remotely and facilitate meetings online. Notwithstanding, some organizations report that the pandemic significantly undermined projects’ performance and result. Franck Samkomble, an M&E officer at Horizons Femmes, noted that the company recorded its weakest performance of the fiscal year in March, April, and May 2020.
References


Certified MEAL DPro, Albert Mivo Ndoubé is a development sociologist, an analyst, and a specialist in monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning for projects and programs. Albert’s work and publications concentrate on sustainable development, gender, public health, and community participation.

Philippe Ferdinand Onana holds a master’s in sociology from the Université de Yaoundé 1. Philippe is an associate researcher at the Laboratoire des études sociales appliquées au développement durable and a junior expert in monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning for humanitarian programs and projects. His research focuses on issues of gender, public health, and community participation.
This article reflects on the experience of the Project Performance Evaluation of the Coastal Climate Resilient Infrastructure Project (CCRIP) in Bangladesh, conducted by the Independent Office of Evaluation of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It focuses on how the project’s evaluation methodology and approach were adapted to the challenges and restrictions imposed by COVID-19. These included the use of remote interviews and GIS data and imagery to compensate for the ban on international and domestic travel. Thanks to the local networks of national team members, the evaluation team was able to reach out to local technical staff and project beneficiaries in project sites that could not be visited. They participated in interviews, took photographic images, and recorded short videos documenting the road and market infrastructure built by the project, which the evaluation used as vicarious observations. While ‘traditional’ approaches entailing field visits and the collaboration of national and international specialists remain the ‘first-best’ option, and while technology cannot substitute for field visits, this evaluation points to measures that can be taken to control for bias in data collection and analysis. However, an important caveat on the use of Geographic Information System (GIS) data and imagery is that CCRIP had a strong focus on infrastructure, making remote sensing suitable to assess the quality of construction and specific aspects of its use. The same may not apply to other types of projects or evaluative questions.
Introduction

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, international organizations rushed to issue guidance notes to help evaluators manage the possible impacts on evaluation processes. Among the first, the Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) of the World Bank identified several areas of concern, including: (i) restricted access of evaluators to stakeholders for data collection at the institutional level; (ii) constraints due to being unable to conduct on-site data collection, limiting the possibility to develop contextualized perspectives and to conduct inductive inquiry; and (iii) a growing risk of bias in conducting remote data collection, with stakeholders interviews at local government and grassroots levels more difficult to plan (compared to those at the central government level; i.e., the “government bias”). According to IEG, such challenges indicated a need to improve what is feasible and find ways around what is not feasible, using caution in reaching out to informants, capitalizing on existing or less common data sources, and making greater use of desk reviews, GIS and spatial observations and geotagged data, and big data.

IFAD’s Independent Office of Evaluation (IOE) also issued guidance for its evaluators, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of different methods and tools that could be used when a field mission was not possible due to global restrictions on movements. While the issues and solutions described in the guidance are not all new, for instance, as compared to emergency and humanitarian evaluations, for organizations like IFAD, they entailed the need for a significant shift in evaluation methodology.

This article aims to reflect on the “real life” experience of adapting an evaluation approach for the Project Performance Evaluation of the Coastal Climate Resilient Infrastructure Project (CCRIP) in Bangladesh that was conducted during the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.
The article covers three areas:

- **How the approach to the evaluation of CCRIP was adapted** to deal with the challenges presented by COVID-19, particularly the use of remote interviews and GIS data and imagery to compensate for being unable to conduct a field mission.

- **How effective this approach was in the case of CCRIP**, including due to the unexpected prospect that arose from extreme climate events (a cyclone and then floods) that hit the area after the project closed and enabled a natural experiment to evaluate climate resilience.

- **What lessons are relevant for other evaluations** both during a time of pandemic and in “normal” times, including in relation to the need to maintain the quality and integrity of the evaluation process, while also containing costs.

**Context of the evaluation**

CCRIP was implemented by the Local Government Engineering Department of the Government of Bangladesh from 2013 to 2019 and was co-financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW). The project aimed to improve livelihoods for poor households in twelve coastal districts in southwest Bangladesh by building or rehabilitating climate-resilient roads and markets in economically disadvantaged rural areas highly vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change. CCRIP also aimed to pilot and establish ways to mainstream climate resilience in rural infrastructure.

IOE’s project performance evaluation of CCRIP focused on project activities and performance pertaining to IFAD funding and supervision. The evaluation sought to determine whether CCRIP’s goal and objectives were effectively achieved - and in the manner anticipated – to identify lessons and recommendations for IFAD programs and operations going forward. Using a theory of change and contribution analysis approach, the evaluation aimed to validate and build upon the results presented in project documentation and in an impact assessment carried out by IFAD in 2018, by triangulating data from various sources.

**Adapting the approach to the evolving context of the COVID-19 pandemic.** The project evaluation took place during what later became the worst phase of the pandemic in Bangladesh. Preparations started in February 2020, with a field mission planned to take place in March 2020. The worsening situation and the emerging safety and ethical concerns arising from the health crisis led to repeated postponements of the field mission. This demanded a continuous shift in the “business as usual” approach, followed by various alternative plans, up to the final plan implemented in mid-2020. The main changes to the approach, costs and process are summarized in Table 1. The key methodological changes are explored in more detail in the next section of the paper.

**Key methodological aspects of the revised evaluation approach**

Three main changes were made to the evaluation approach because of the COVID-19 pandemic:

I. The in-person field mission, initially planned to be carried out by two international consultants supported by one national consultant, was substituted by a remote field mission by an enlarged team of four national consultants, coordinated and supervised by the international consultants;

II. Data collection and validations were done remotely by the international and national consultants, using a
Table 1: Changes from the “business-as-usual” plan (February 2020) to the final plan (July 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation approach</th>
<th>Initial – before the pandemic started</th>
<th>Final – after the pandemic took hold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methods and data</strong></td>
<td>Desk review of project documentation, M&amp;E data, secondary data; in-person data collection and validation at central and local levels.</td>
<td>More in-depth desk review; remote data collection and validation (central, local level); use of spatial/GIS data and imagery/videos to assess infrastructure quality and performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sampling of communities for field visit</strong></td>
<td>Sampling based on location remoteness, climate vulnerability, infrastructure type, frequency of previous mission visits.</td>
<td>Additional selection criterion: area affected by Cyclone Amphan (to evaluate climate resilience of infrastructure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International and national consultants and resource persons</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Number, type and role of international consultants** | Two consultants:  
- Evaluation and livelihoods  
- Poverty reduction  
- Gender | Unchanged: Two consultants, but much more time spent on adapting the approach, on desk review, and supporting national consultants. Senior independent advisor from Bangladesh hired to strengthen the peer review process. |
| **Number, type and role of the national consultants** | One consultant:  
- Livelihoods  
- Climate change  
- Gender  
- Overall facilitation | Four consultants:  
- Livelihoods, climate change, gender  
- GIS/spatial data, imagery and tools  
- Infrastructure (independent engineer)  
- Facilitation of evaluation process |
| **Evaluation costs** |                                      |                                     |
| **Travel costs** | International flights and local travel and subsistence for two consultants | Mission canceled |
| **International consultants** | Cost for two consultants | Additional cost for an independent external advisor to act as quality control reviewer |
| **National consultants** | Cost for one consultant | Cost for original consultant increased; new costs for additional three consultants |
| **Total evaluation cost** |                                      | Estimated by IEO at 10-12% higher overall |
| **International consultants** | Standard workload for project evaluations | Workload increased by 20-30% |
| **National counterparts** | National counterparts’ workload | Decreased as did not need to coordinate and accompany field mission |

complex arrangement of internet-based and mobile communications; and

III. Extensive use was made of GIS data and satellite and digital imagery to evaluate the performance, quality, and sustainability of CCRIP infrastructure.

An additional change was made as a result of a major cyclone—Cyclone Amphan—and of heavy flooding that affected some project districts in May and June 2020 (see Box 1). The evaluation team had planned to select locations for field data collection, based primarily on climate vulnerability and remoteness of the location, the type of infrastructure the project had constructed, and several past visits by IFAD or other missions. Although far from welcome, the cyclone and flooding presented an opportunity to evaluate how well CCRIP infrastructure had coped with the type of extreme weather that it was supposedly designed to withstand.
As the first stage of sampling, the evaluation selected two out of the twelve project districts (Satkhira and Khulna) as they had been most affected by the cyclone. A third district that was affected by heavy flooding but not the cyclone (Shariatpur) was also selected. Three communities with IFAD-funded road and market improvements were then selected to represent diverse geophysical and socioeconomic characteristics for each district. In total, nine locations were selected and classified according to the type of community market and connecting road, vulnerability to climate impacts, and spatial location, with their latitude and longitude at Map and Picture level applied on Google Earth Imagery (see Figure 1).

After an extensive desk review of available data and information, the team of international and national consultants interviewed a wide range of stakeholders and key informants at central, regional, district, and village levels. Given that internal travels were not authorized for health reasons, interviews were carried out mostly via Zoom, Skype, and WhatsApp, in line with interviewees’ preferences, with phone and video calls sometimes used for community-level stakeholders. For the latter, a snowball sampling approach was applied, in which respondents provided contact details for subsequent people to interview in the selected locations. In addition, photographs and videos of CCRIP infrastructure were taken by local contacts of the evaluators to complement the GIS data and satellite imagery that was acquired from secondary sources. This allowed a before and after CCRIP, and before and after cyclone Amphan, visual assessment (see Figure 2), and the technical review of infrastructure quality (see Figure 3) by the consultant engineer.

Lastly, the team hired an independent external reviewer who had conducted a country-level evaluation in Bangladesh for IFAD in 2014 and knew the country and project implementation context. This provided an additional ‘reality check’ to the validity of the evaluation process and findings.

Lessons learned from the CCRIP evaluation approach

Reflecting upon the experience of the CCRIP evaluation, several important lessons are emerging.

Lessons learned from remote interviews and data collection

The remote approach allowed interviews to be conducted with stakeholders and key informants, while complying with a fundamental ethical principle for evaluations during the pandemic: cause no harm to evaluators or to informants. As a result, almost all categories of informants were reached, and many interviews were conducted (75 in total, of whom 41 were beneficiaries). Still, there was somewhat less access to independent informants than in a “normal” evaluation, with a tendency to reach more informants at the government level (i.e. the anticipated “government bias”).

Box 1. Impacts of extreme climate and weather events after CCRIP ended: a natural experiment

On 20 May 2020, Cyclone Amphan made landfall in southwest Bangladesh, bringing 150 km/h winds and causing the deaths of 26 people and damage to housing, infrastructure, and farms. Most affected were the coastal regions of Satkhira and Khulna, both being CCRIP regions. A few weeks later, severe floods unrelated to the Amphan cyclone, which mainly hit other Bangladesh areas, also affected some parts of CCRIP areas. This provided an opportunity to assess the quality of CCRIP-built infrastructure and the resilience and sustainability of infrastructure to climate events in some project districts. It represented an opportunistic (initially unforeseen) natural experiment.
The use of snowball sampling for selecting informants at the community-level, which was the only practical option available, inevitably introduced the possibility of selection bias, although it must be acknowledged that evaluators often (i.e., even under ‘normal conditions’) do not have complete control over who is interviewed during field visits that are organized by project implementers. Moreover, the evaluators were able to draw on reliable secondary information on community-level impacts from an IFAD’s impact study that involved rigorous sampling and data analysis methods.

The remote approach meant that it was somewhat more difficult to probe and triangulate information. This was partly because interviews at central and regional levels were conducted mainly by international consultants (in English), while interviews at district and community levels were conducted mainly by national consultants (in Bengali). However, the potential disjuncture this caused was greatly reduced by having a detailed evaluation framework and unified reporting structure.

Another limitation was that international consultants had no opportunity to interact directly with poorer, marginalized, and less educated groups or use observation techniques. This mainly concerned the poor and vulnerable women contracted for infrastructure construction and other beneficiary groups such as farmers and market traders, making it more challenging to assess gender dynamics and the relationships between stakeholder groups. This constraint was only partially offset by involving a national consultant with expertise in gender and social inclusion and experience working in the project area. There is also a risk that the remote modality, as opposed to face-to-face visits, could have affected the trust and willingness of informants to be open and honest, but the quality of information gathered suggests that this was not a major problem.

An additional challenge was that, because of the pandemic, some informants, especially at the government level, were extremely busy and not easy to reach for interviews. In a few cases, they had contracted COVID-19. The health of family members of some national consultants was also affected by the pandemic, further affecting the evaluation process. This raised the need for tact, flexibility, patience, and time from all sides. On the other hand, the remote process freed up the time that evaluators would have spent on travel, including time spent in Dhaka’s notoriously heavy traffic, while driving to meet informants.

Lessons learned from the use of spatial data and imagery

The collection of GIS and spatial data and imagery on infrastructure (roads, markets), and the geo-referencing to the selected field locations, was one of the main innovations. It allowed a systematic visual technical assessment by the consultant engineer, which was then further validated by interviews with local people and engineers. One challenge was the difficulty to access maps and images that were precisely comparable in terms of the dates they referred to since the approach had to be to a certain extent opportunistic, i.e. sometimes comparing maps that differed by days or weeks. Yet the essential “before and after the project” and “before and after the extreme weather events of mid-2020” comparisons could be conducted.

The quality of the GIS/spatial data and imagery was also sometimes a limitation. Indeed, in some cases, the quality of the images and maps was poor, with low resolution, and some natural phenomena limiting visibility affected the images available. However, in most communities, particularly when the images were of lower quality, additional pictures and videos were taken around the observed project market and road infrastructure to allow additional infrastructure review. Here the evaluation benefited from the collaboration of local contacts of...
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Lessons learned on the evaluation process

From a process management point of view, the evaluation needed not to overburden the IFAD country office or national partners at a time of considerable stress for them. The evaluation being conducted remotely, without a field mission, was positive in this respect, although the evaluation still required considerable administrative input on the part of IFAD at headquarters and at the country office, particularly during the initial period when the approach was being constantly revised. The amount of information and other support from government counterparts was still significant, but they were relieved of the responsibility of setting up and accompanying a field mission.

The organization of interviews with national partners and institutional informants based in Bangladesh was made possible by hiring a national resource person who had former exposure to the project and already knew many relevant people (i.e., involved in the IFAD impact study). The GIS consultant was also familiar with CCRIP from former work with the project, which eased the process, but also meant he could not be involved in data analysis to ensure impartiality. However, the international consultants’ supervision and coordination remained essential at all stages of the process, and their role was fundamental in analyzing and contextualizing the evidence from all sources. The cost of hiring additional national consultants...
and a national resource person for organizing interviews was offset by savings on international travels with the total costs of the evaluation in line with IOE standards for project-level evaluations.

Conclusions and lessons from the experience

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced evaluators to adapt, innovate and learn, and some of the approaches and methods that have been used will likely become a normal part of evaluation practice in the future. The experience with the CCRIP evaluation suggests a cautionary message regarding conducting evaluations entirely remotely, whether during the COVID-19 pandemic or under other circumstances. There is no perfect substitute for traditional evaluation approaches with an in-person field mission, both in terms of methodological rigor with key advantages remaining, a lower risk of bias, greater ability to reach all categories of informants, and easier ability to probe and use observation techniques for inductive inquiry. Although remote approaches most likely reduce the time to complete work, these approaches are not necessarily faster and less costly than traditional ones.

Notwithstanding, in this evaluation and in other cases, a remote evaluation may be the only viable option. In such a case, a strategy to arrive at a comprehensive and relatively nuanced set of findings and recommendations could include the following elements:

- A team of national consultants with complementary skill sets, and a local facilitator to arrange remote interviews, with international consultants coordinating the overall analysis;
- A plan to carry out interviews using a mix of internet-based, mobile, and traditional communication channels, with a detailed evaluation matrix and reporting structure to guide data collection;
Ensuring there is a good use of existing information and secondary data (including a household impact study), and expanding data collection to GIS data, imagery, and videos in the selected field districts; and

Opportunistically, taking advantage of extreme climate events to evaluate climate resilience.

However, the applicability of this approach would have been more problematic if the impact study had not been available and if fewer M&E data could be found. A direct field inquiry would have been needed to gather more, different and unbiased data in project communities. It should also be noted that this evaluation was for a project partially focused on building or rehabilitating rural infrastructure, for which GIS or spatial data were particularly useful and appropriate for visually identifying and reviewing infrastructure quality and sustainability. If the project had involved infrastructure with less identifiable spatial features than roads and markets, or if the project had invested in socioeconomic interventions, the use of GIS/spatial data methods and tools is likely to have been less relevant.

Nevertheless, the application of these practices can help strengthen other remote evaluations during the COVID-19 pandemic and in different situations when a remote evaluation is the only feasible option.
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References


Endnotes


3. Due to travel restrictions, limited institutional access or "lockdowns", with evaluators needing to rely on opportunistic sampling, which is however prone to selection bias.

4. Tele conferencing was a partial solution being also prone to bias especially for interviews on complex or sensitive topics.


7. E.g. Leveraging the content of existing documents, new technologies and sources of data, by harnessing and analysis of project documents, M&E data, subnational data from others active in same areas, impact assessments, satellite images; online or virtual interviews and surveys and – if possible – field visits by local consultants and a short validation mission in a later point in time.

8. Including quantitative data from IFAD’s results and impact management system (RIMS) and project M&E, baseline, endline, and thematic studies by CCRIP; project documents: supervision reports, Mid Term Review, the Project Completion Report (PCR); basic GIS maps developed by the project; and secondary data and relevant academic studies. The project could also count on a full impact assessment study conducted by IFAD’s Research and Impact Assessment division (RIA) and published in 2019.

9. For reference to covid-19 data in Bangladesh: https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/bd

10. These included: (i) increasingly stringent restrictions on international and in-country travel; (ii) the need to follow social distancing guidelines; (iii) a reduced availability of stakeholders or key informants for interviews; (iv) financial or psychological stress that many people were likely to be experiencing; and (v) possible sampling bias deriving from these issues.


12. Including government agencies, local government representatives and engineers, former project staff, IFAD country staff, co-financing agencies, partner organizations, research institutes, market management committees, and various beneficiary groups.

13. The evaluation collected a total of 103 relevant images and 11 videos of CCRIP infrastructure, several maps and aerial images.
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In early 2020, the world was visited by the COVID-19 pandemic, a sudden and persistent phenomenon that has radically changed the way we live and work. There has since been an urgent need for organizations to adjust their working operations in line with the effects of the pandemic.
In the field of monitoring and evaluation (M&E), the pandemic has brought new challenges such as limited time and access for data collection and analysis in addition to a lack of proper interactions to promote the use of information generated from M&E. Experience from the Resilient Food System (RFS) program demonstrates how online and remote sensing tools ensure the continuation of assessments despite the effects of a pandemic.

The RFS program comprises 12 sub-Saharan African country projects and a hub project, all focusing on transformational change within African food systems. It has been funded by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) through the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The program aims to restore up to 2.1 million ha of degraded land, sequester or avoid carbon emissions of up to 59 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (mtCO2e), and benefit up to 2 million livelihoods households. A survey showed that program partners’ normal working operations were greatly affected at the onset of the pandemic, including poor facilitation to work from home for 80% of partners, additional household responsibilities for 69%, and reduced working hours for 50%. In addition, the restrictions on travel and movement resulted in disruptions in field data collections, limited networking, and time for data analysis and decision support information.
The program had set out provisions for using online and remote sensing-oriented platforms to analyze and share data on the onset. Technical partners were sensitized and trained on various remote sensing tools and methods for tracking spatial indicators affecting food security. *Trends.Earth*, for example, is a remote sensing tool that enables users to create spatial layers of their project sites and assess their land cover, land productivity, soil organic carbon, and land degradation status. This is an open-source tool and requires no prior skills in remote sensing to use. It analyzes land degradation (SDG 15.3.1, measures the proportion of land degraded over the total land area), using three sub-indicators: land productivity, land cover, and soil organic carbon. These are useful indicators for monitoring improved land-use activities, reducing soil erosion, and improving tree cover. *Trends.Earth* gives a visual map on land degradation status and each of the three sub-indicators and computes their annual trends. These results provide quick assessments on the geographical areas to prioritize land restoration interventions and the current status of restoration activities.

The *Resilience Atlas* is another tool used by the RFS to monitor food security indicators. It is an open-source tool for visualizing and analyzing resilience indicators for food security projects. The Atlas has been uploaded with over 60 global datasets related to food security. Practitioners can visualize conditions in their project sites for each of the datasets and overlay two or more datasets to understand critical factors affecting food security in their specific regions. The output is in the form of easy-to-understand maps that show the status of factors affecting food security in sub-Saharan Africa.

*Vital Signs* is another example of technology used for monitoring and assessment within the RFS. It was developed to...
provide better information to help users increase agricultural productivity while avoiding unintended consequences for soil quality, water availability, and other benefits from healthy ecosystems. Vital Signs comprises a series of protocols that guide field data collection with this data then integrated into remote sensing data to provide decision support for stakeholders in agriculture to enhance food security. Country Atlases have been developed for Ghana, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda with comprehensive data on the physical landscape, ecosystem services, soil nutrients, demography, and livelihoods that act as baseline information for the RFS Program.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Remote sensing technologies present a more efficient approach to the monitoring of agriculture and conservation-related interventions. Although they may need to be complemented with ground-truthing, they still potentially save time and cost for monitoring and impact assessment. Therefore, I would recommend the following points to consider in enhancing the use of this technology:

- More practitioners need to be sensitized on the use of remote sensing for M&E, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic period, to ensure access to good quality information to improve food security in Africa. Remote sensing tools and resources are increasingly accessible thanks to advances in satellite technology.

- Capacity building on remote sensing is critical and needs to be incorporated in the designs of programs and projects. Such capacity will not only be instrumental for M&E practitioners, but also to all who need to use this data for decision making. Therefore, the RFS program has undertaken to train all personnel involved in M&E in the specific country projects on the use of remote sensing in monitoring the biophysical indicators.

**Figure 3:** Land degradation map from the Resilience Atlas showing the RFS project sites (in blue). The sites are in highly degraded areas to prioritize restoration in these areas.
Sharing data and knowledge on open-source platforms have several advantages and needs to be embraced by development practitioners. This will increase visibility for the individual researchers and promote wider use of evidence, a sharing made possible using such tools. For example, within the Resilience Atlas, many datasets were obtained from researchers who chose to make their work open source.

Figure 4: Soil nutrients maps of Tanzania developed using the Vital Signs technology.
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Author’s profile

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Before joining Conservation International, Everline was the Planning Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist at the African Forest Forum. Everline holds a Master of Arts Degree in Sociology specialized in impact assessment of conservation enterprises. She has published peer-reviewed articles and blogs related to conservation, particularly the adoption of conservation-related technologies and practices.
The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it devastating socio-economic impacts in both developed and developing countries. Many lives were lost, and many more livelihoods were disrupted. Even in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, where the prevalence of COVID-19 cases has been relatively low, economic growth has stalled in many countries, while nearly 23 million people are projected to be pushed into poverty.

Consequently, governments, together with their development partners, continue to roll-out short to medium-term measures to contain the virus and stimulate economic growth and build back better post the pandemic. In fact, in the early stages of the pandemic, governments, including those of low-income countries, had no choice but to respond to the short-term effects of lockdowns by providing relief to families in hotspots in the form of cash and food transfers. That said, responses to how to address the pandemic differed by country and institution.

For some international development agencies, the first port of call was a reflection on lessons from past interventions in crisis-like situations. For example, at the African Development Bank Group, lessons learned from evaluations of its support during the West Africa Ebola outbreak in 2014 and those of crisis response budget support operations and a host of others were critical in informing its COVID-19 efforts, including a US$10 billion Crisis Response Facility. For some countries – including those affected by the West Africa Ebola crisis – lessons of past crises were drawn on as part of efforts to mitigate the pandemic's impacts.
In fact, concerning responses to the pandemic such as lockdowns and implementation of hygiene protocols, it was quite refreshing to hear African leaders emphasize their commitment to backing their decisions with scientific data and evidence in their regular COVID-19 public addresses. For example, during his 21 April 2020 COVID-19 statement, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa stressed how its decisions concerning the lifting of lockdowns would be backed by “…the best available scientific evidence…”

This notwithstanding, when it came to the actual deployment of short-term relief packages like social assistance payments and food transfers, many low-income countries struggled. In some of these countries, targeting relief support – as in identifying poor and vulnerable – proved difficult because data for facilitating such decisions were nearly non-existent. Even for those who had data available, they were not timely enough to make them useful for facilitating COVID-19 relief decisions.

More importantly, in low-income countries, there is certain inertia towards systematically documenting lessons from interventions not just in crisis- and disaster-like situations but even in normal times. This brings to the fore the broader issue of governments’ commitments to evaluating their interventions and drawing lessons from what works and what does not.

Evidently, while the pandemic has reaffirmed the value of evidence use in responding effectively to the socio-economic impact during and post the pandemic, it has equally spotlighted gaps in evidence-based policy-making practices in the African context. Thus, governments will have to seize the opportunity to invest more in generating and utilizing evidence that is appropriate and timely. This will require governments to not just strengthen their national evaluations systems and statistical capacities, but also develop information technology-based platforms that comprehensively and centrally archives evaluation and research evidence from across sector ministries, departments, and agencies. This should facilitate accessibility, retrieval, and dissemination of evidence for policy-making even in the case of emergencies.

And for champions and advocates of evidence-based policy-making within and outside government in sub-Saharan Africa, this is an opportune time to push for a cultural change towards evidence generation and utilization.

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A year since the globalization of the novel coronavirus, widely known as COVID-19, countries are battling to adapt to the different mutations of the virus and the concomitant changes it has brought to the world of work, schooling, and social interaction. Governments have inevitably been compelled to enact regulations to limit COVID-19 infections, and lockdowns have consequently become a norm for severely affected countries. The impact of the pandemic has been equally severe on social, economic, political, and cultural life. Unemployment rates soared as companies closed shop and retrenched their staff; health care systems, both private and public, are overwhelmed by a greater number of infected people; and different professions are forced into the 21st century digital world of work.

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The pandemic and its shock on global health, economic, social, and cultural systems have underscored the foundational value of using evidence emanating from monitoring systems and research in health, education, and economics to respond to the multi-faceted challenges and risks presented by COVID-19. The significance of such evidence-generation systems cannot be underestimated, particularly their contribution to decision-making, shaping public opinion, and responses to the pandemic. For instance, infection data from health systems informed the enactment of lockdown regulations and easing thereof. Similarly, socio-economic data from sector performance reports, household surveys and research informed government social security programs and stimulus packages to assist individuals in distress and ailing sectors of the economy.

In the South African context, rising COVID-19 infection rates compelled the national government to invoke the Disaster Management Act of 2002, which constitutionally empowers the executive to respond efficiently to global disasters such as the novel coronavirus. To manage this declared National State of Disaster, national and provincial governments established Coronavirus Command Councils constituted by advisors from various sectors and/or clusters (health, economic, security, and education clusters), whose mandate was to monitor infection rates and socio-economic impacts thereof. The Command Councils used monitoring evidence from both the health and socio-economic sectors to recommend the easing or tightening of lockdown regulations in response to the dynamic COVID-19 pandemic, depending upon the mutating nature of the virus.

Essentially the pandemic has also highlighted the transdisciplinary nature of governance, for instance, the use of health systems monitoring data to scientifically track the trajectory of COVID-19 infection rates to inform government decisions on restricting domestic and international travel and economic activity. In contrast to functional monitoring systems, weak statistical systems and dysfunctional reporting systems have not provided reliable real-time data to allow governments to be agile, efficient, and effective in their response to the multiple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. An important fact to highlight with regard to country governments with functional monitoring systems is the need to make use of monitoring data so as to bolster the COVID and post-COVID recovery.
of peoples, education and economic systems. To further illustrate the importance of using data from functional monitoring systems, a significant number of countries (including those in the Global North such as the United States of America, Britain, and France) suffered from higher infection rates relative to others amidst various COVID waves, and this has been partly a result of their failure to enact timely lockdowns in line with rising infections. In certain instances, the failure of governments to enact travel and economic activity restrictions has led to an exponential rise in COVID-19 infections, including incidents of higher morbidity and mortality relative to those who enacted timely lockdowns to prioritize lives over economic activity and mobility.

In sum, the global health pandemic has proven the worth of many professions, with the health profession and governance (including the practice of monitoring and use of evidence to inform government responses to COVID-19) being amongst the most pressured frontline professions tasked with a responsibility of responding to the devastating effects of COVID-19. What is to be examined post the pandemic is the performance of these professions when confronted by this unprecedented 21st century pandemic of monumental, cross-sectoral consequences. Lastly, the pandemic has highlighted the eternal value of monitoring as a real-time day-to-day activity that remains an apex implementation tool without which policy and program success is in jeopardy.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused devastating disruption to fragile health care systems and wide-scale havoc to economies in Africa. The limited testing capacity, shortage of trained healthcare personnel, inadequate ICU facilities, and lack of funds all contributed to Africa’s susceptibility to the pandemic. Governments implemented “lockdown” regulations that severely curtailed people’s movement, which created threats to livelihoods, amplified inequalities, multiplied the number of unemployed, and exacerbated chronic health and social welfare conditions.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have also been severely affected by the crisis brought on by the pandemic. Some field interventions had to be halted, leaving communities with no services nor support during lockdown periods. At the same time, CSOs including Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) have also been challenged to step up during this crisis period. It was anticipated that VOPEs would contribute towards Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and promoting credible evidence to be used to fast-track decision-making processes. On the basis of a discussion event organized by the African Evaluation Association, this article reflects on how VOPEs in Africa measured up as CSOs to promote the role and value of M&E to generate knowledge for use on interventions responding to the pandemic as well as their ability to be and remain focused and relevant. It finds that VOPE activities in Africa during the pandemic appear to have been piecemeal and uncoordinated. Adaptation to new modes of engagement was slow and limited in many cases. However, individual VOPE members have been instrumental in championing social programs geared to aid the poorer members of society. It is anticipated that the lessons learned from the current crisis will help VOPEs to develop readily available tools and techniques to be used during crisis scenarios.
Introduction and overview

Civil Society Organizations in Africa

CSOs in Africa have been severely affected by the crisis brought on by the pandemic. As frontline operators, their actions, normal activities, and survival have been under threat and undermined to the point of closure for some. Some field interventions had to be halted because of the pandemic, and communities were left with no services and no support during lockdown periods. While the demand for services increased, staff of NGOs and CSOs could not deliver and had to adapt to a constantly changing environment that was also life-threatening. A survey of more than a thousand CSOs in African countries revealed that the sudden appearance hit them hard and forced them to make immediate organizational changes. The findings describe two types of adaptability on the part of the CSOs. Firstly, the overwhelming majority managed to reorient their activities and sources of funding – either self-funding or appeals to local private donors. Secondly, many CSOs released their capacities through synergies in partnerships and coalitions of interest at the national level, sharing information, providing services to individuals, and aiding vulnerable communities (Sesmiasons, 2020). CSOs were compelled to step in to support where governments were unable, incapable of, or unwilling to help. There are numerous examples of community action networks in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and other countries, relying on the generosity of local and external donors that managed to support vulnerable and marginalized communities. Many CSOs are continuing in this role.

Methodology

In February 2021, in partnership with the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and...
Results (CLEAR) for Anglophone Africa, the African Evaluation Association (AfREa) hosted a discussion on the state of VOPEs in Africa based on the tentative findings of an ongoing study. The participants of the online event expressed their gratitude for the high quality of the inputs, with their comments and discussions indicating a high appreciation of the initiative. Because of the overlap with this paper, we (the authors) seized the opportunity to engage some of the participants after the meeting around two questions: (1) How have VOPEs in Africa responded (during the pandemic) to health and socio-economic challenges? And (2) Would you say your VOPE (or VOPEs in general) has contributed towards generating or providing information about best M&E practices learned during this crisis? This accorded us a qualitative approach to this paper.

Bryman (2014) defines qualitative research as a strategy that promotes the usage of words as opposed to quantification in the collection and analysis of data. Due to time limitations, a convenience sampling strategy targeting representatives of VOPEs in the region was opted for. Overall, feedback was solicited from seven respondents (for further details, please see acknowledgments at the end of the article). To this effect, emails coupled with follow-up messages sent via WhatsApp (a messaging app) were sent to the participants who were known to the authors of this article. Following this, a thematic content analysis mode was used to synthesize the findings elicited from the VOPE representatives.

A brief outline of the health and socio-economic challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and as experienced in African countries, is presented below. It highlights the devastation caused by the pandemic and provides a sense of the scale of the challenges that governments and CSOs in Africa are required to respond to. This is followed by reflections on reports of how VOPEs responded during the pandemic.

**Health challenges**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused devastating disruption to fragile health care systems and wide-scale havoc to economies in Africa. The health care systems in Africa were ill-prepared for the testing regimes required to monitor and treat the spread of the coronavirus. This is despite Africa not being a stranger to epidemics. In August 2014, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) in response to the West Africa Ebola epidemic that went on for over two years (Staunton, Swanepoel and Labushaigne, 2020). The late onset of the pandemic in Africa, months later than in other regions in Europe and Asia, allowed African governments time to put in place diverse forms of 'lockdown' regulations to slow the spread of the virus. But countries like Egypt and South Africa, with their relatively stronger travel connections to global hotspots in Asia and Europe, had steep rises in cases initially. The limited testing capacity, shortage of trained personnel required for diagnostics and intensive care units (ICU), inadequate ventilators and ICU facilities, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers, and lack of funds all contributed to Africa’s susceptibility to the pandemic (Lone and Ahmad, 2020). Africa’s high disease burden and high poverty levels add to the health concerns generally as it is estimated that there are 26 million people infected with HIV, 2.5 with tuberculosis, 71 million with hepatitis B or C, and 213 million with malaria in the Africa region (Lone and Ahmad, 2020). Furthermore, people’s immune systems have been compromised with a double burden of non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes.

South Africa has had the highest number of reported infections in Africa, with just over 2 million cases reported as of July 2021. However, the number of new daily cases (1 911) had decreased significantly since the beginning of January 2021, when the
infection rate was at 20,000+ per day. Other African countries reported smaller overall case numbers with Morocco 480,000; Tunisia 226,000, Egypt 176,000, and Nigeria with 150,000. The WHO suggested that testing in Africa was still low compared to other regions, and there was a concern that inadequate testing may conceal the actual spread of the virus. The constraints in enhancing transparency and access to information about COVID-19 are due in part to limited resources. However, the Tanzanian government stopped reporting cases at the behest of its president. The latter declared that the pandemic was finished in his country due to the power of prayer and the effectiveness of traditional remedies. Fast forward to May 2021, a new policy shift that promotes compliance to international standards such as wearing masks, testing, and quarantine for travelers etc., has been adopted by the Tanzanian government.

In general, most governments on the continent have heeded the advice from the WHO and the Africa Centre for Disease Control (CDC). Apart from a few countries like South Africa and Morocco, the infection rates in Africa have been relatively low compared to a region such as North America. However, science experts have warned of a possible resurgence in the future due to virus mutation. A new variant of the coronavirus e.g., DELTA, originated in India, has emerged in South Africa, and identical infections have been recorded elsewhere in Africa, such as Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Comoros, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. The pandemic has also exposed the desperate state of health services in most African countries and their inability to service the poor and rural communities. Therefore, health warnings remain, and people are encouraged to get tested, even where the governments’ pace of testing has been slow. The use of hand sanitizers and the wearing of facemasks are universally promoted. While the rollout of vaccines is only beginning in countries in Africa, social distancing is still being practiced and, in some instances, legislated through regulations pertaining to the number of people that can attend events such as funerals or church services.

Socio-economic challenges

The pandemic continues to bring pain and suffering that have been very real to those who have lost loved ones, relatives, and friends, whether there were underlying health conditions or not. Medical practitioners, doctors, nurses, community health workers have not been spared, and they continue to risk their lives in the face of this global threat to our well-being. In most parts of the world and in Africa, governments implemented “lockdown” regulations that severely curtailed people's movement. (Hamann et al., 2020). For example, the hard lockdown in South Africa implemented in late March 2020 required all people, except those providing essential services, to stay at home. Similar lockdown regulations occurred in Kenya, Nigeria. Uganda and Mauritius, where governments restricted the movement of people, banned gatherings such as markets and enforced the closure of schools, universities, and both internal and national borders. The lockdown regulations in South Africa, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe were accompanied by allegations of excessive force and human rights abuses (Hamann et al., 2020). This was the most prominent governmental response to the pandemic that has also had the most crucial economic and social consequences.

Hamann et al. (2020) highlight a few aspects where large sections of society were adversely affected because a solution intrinsic to lockdown measures was created and borne out in China and Europe with significantly different socio-economic conditions. The shelters of small and overcrowded shacks in sprawling informal settlements of South Africa and other African countries could not manage the “stay-at-home” mandate, and many had no access to water and basic services. The stay-at-home regulations also
created threats to livelihoods, and they increased the risks of malnutrition and starvation among children. Job losses have become a reality, and domestic violence has increased where, for example, in South Africa, gender-based violence (GBV) has been named the second pandemic. The adverse effects on children from time loss in formal schooling must still be assessed going forward. Overall, indications are that the mental well-being of many households—young children and adults alike—has been severely compromised. The impact of the pandemic has also been exacerbated by other disasters such as the locust invasion in Kenya, along with droughts and flooding in several parts of Africa.

Developed countries in the North have been able to cushion, to some extent, some of the threats outlined above through economic stimulus packages. Some countries on the African continent such as Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa etc., have, to a varying extent, introduced economic stimulus packages to ease the impact of the pandemic. In addition, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) provided financial assistance and debt service relief, to the tune of $16 million, to member countries facing the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this is borrowed money that must be repaid, and countries have had to commit to undertake governance measures that promote accountable and transparent use of these resources. Very many countries in Africa were not able to support citizens with the loss of income caused by the pandemic, as depicted below:

The pandemic exposed Africa’s underbelly, it amplified inequalities, it multiplied the number of unemployed, it exacerbated chronic health and social welfare conditions, and as stated by the President of South Africa in May 2020, “COVID-19 has brought about the destruction of the economy” (PWC, 2020). However, he

Figure 1: Income support during the COVID-19 pandemic, Feb 21, 2021

Income support during the COVID-19 pandemic, Feb 21, 2021

Income support captures if the government is covering the salaries or providing direct cash payments, universal basic income, or similar, of people who lose their jobs or cannot work.

Note: This income support may not apply to workers in all sectors, and may vary at the sub-national level.
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did add to this statement that it was the collective responsibility of everyone to rebuild and reposition the economy. The crisis gave rise to the growth in some places of spontaneous civil society organizing. These non-state actors filled the gaps left by constrained government responses to the social crisis (Hamann et al. 2020). Community action networks applied their experiences from the Ebola epidemic to pioneer establishing “community care centers,” which are community-based self-isolation facilities for those infected, “to balance out a clinical approach to the pandemic with a social one.”

VOPEs in Africa and their responsiveness to the above-cited challenges

VOPEs are CSOs or groups created around a body of knowledge concerning relevant theories, methodologies, or policy instruments. VOPEs also provide relevant ways of acquiring knowledge of Monitoring & Evaluation, and participants have an interest in maintaining the integrity of their body of knowledge. Global initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union’s acceptance of a results-based approach to its efforts have contributed to the nature and content of the focus of M&E in Africa, with VOPEs being informed by these developments (Abrahams, 2017). A VOPE is an umbrella body for people interested in advancing evaluation as a profession. It can function at regional and national levels as it brings together evaluation practitioners from government, academia, and NGOs. As professional associations, VOPEs have a significant contribution in making countries engender good governance. More specifically, as CSOs, they are challenged to:

- Provide knowledge of localities and population groups relevant to policy.
- Provide information about good practices or how problems have been addressed in other places.
- Provide an understanding of fundamental factors that affect success – provide theory.
- Do an ongoing assessment of the claims of other actors in the debate of good governance. Provide venues/platforms for stakeholders to carry on the necessary discussions. (Chalmers, 2000)
AfrEA was founded in 1999 as an umbrella organization of VOPEs in Africa. Its mission is to promote robust evaluation through its members. There are currently more than 40 country-member VOPEs associated with AfrEA. These members were invited to an online discussion in February 2021 on the state of VOPEs in Africa based on an ongoing study initiated by the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results (CLEAR) and Anglophone Africa. Some of the feedback and sentiments during this discussion are presented below. In addition, there was follow-up engagement with key informants who shared their views, perceptions, opinions, and interpretations of how VOPEs in Africa responded during the pandemic to social, economic, and health challenges.

The online presentation in February 2021 revealed that VOPEs had been adversely affected by the pandemic. There was a general slow-down in activities and visibility. VOPE activity during the initial stages of the pandemic was presented as ‘non-existent in most countries in Africa; ‘weak and not focused’ in a few countries; and ‘directed at evidence building’ in only two countries. The strict lockdown measures prohibited adequate coordination, interaction, and communication. Funding for VOPE activities also dwindled as partner countries were affected and refocused their support on other priorities. Technology and the possibilities presented by the online environment as well as engagement with other civil society organizations, created opportunities for VOPEs to communicate and collaborate. However, the overall conclusion was that VOPEs did not deploy monitoring, data visualization, evaluation tools to add M&E evidence into the policy debate. Where VOPEs did manage to respond to some of the challenges, it was considered isolated occurrences in one or two countries.

The respondents also indicated that VOPEs in Africa did not maximally respond to the socio-economic challenges presented by the pandemic. According to them, the challenges of lockdown, the health risks, and the lack of funding for VOPE activities contributed to the lack of initiative. However, some responses were more nuanced such as the following anecdotes:

"The COVID-19 pandemic offered both a challenge and an opportunity for associations to convince policymakers and society of the inestimable value of M&E evidence in helping countries navigate the complex problems that they face."

"There are two areas of focus, which were championed by the VOPE during this crisis. This includes (i) experimenting with the use of technology or online platforms to deliver several of their program activities, and (ii) advancing humanity as change drivers. We have conducted five capacity-building activities through Zoom, and this has helped us reach more members. Our average attendance has been around 90 in all our meetings."

The adaptability of VOPEs has been minimal, according to most of the respondents. VOPEs, according to them, showed that very little value was happening around COVID-19 and there appeared to be a lack of responsiveness and agility by VOPEs during the pandemic. Beyond the non-responsiveness and lack of agility by VOPEs, respondents further explained the reasons behind this phenomenon. One of the respondents argued that "most of the evaluators are independent consultants who generally respond to a Request for Proposal (RFP). Very few evaluation consultancies will initiate looking for money/funding nor can they do that as profit-making entities”. This implies that most evaluators in the M&E landscape are independent consultants instead of linked to institutions. They are contracted to execute ad hoc projects and programs on behalf of their clients and are probably preoccupied with meeting their clients’ expectations on deliverables and timelines. This could mean that very few funded projects aimed at growing the
body of knowledge of evaluation were undertaken. A different but similar point was made by another respondent speaking on behalf of the younger constituency. This respondent conceded that “Just like most associations involved with the implementation of evaluation activities, the Young and Emerging Evaluators (YEEs) have also found this period to be a challenging time. For example, the YEEs did not have any single physical activity up until February 2021. For almost a year, only two online capacity-building workshops were delivered, neither being well attended. This is because YEEs lacked laptops, good internet connection, and a poor mindset about online studying”. This points to structural barriers that could have contributed to the lack of an adequate and coordinated response witnessed during the pandemic.

During the AfrEA webinar, it was mentioned that there had been a gradual move to technology use among VOPEs to deliver their various programs of action in servicing their constituencies. One interesting phenomenon observed from this presentation was that there was an understanding that VOPEs’ members are first members of the society (communities) and citizens of their respective countries who are accountable for the upkeep of these communities. Consequently, these professionals heeded the call to support social interventions delivered by governments, CSOs, and NGOs in the region. This point was eloquently made by one of the respondents who mentioned that “financial resources and feeding schemes for poorer people were lobbied for and distributed to those in need.” Another said, “VOPE members volunteered their time to help communities spread prevention measures and create awareness such as wearing masks, social distancing, handwashing, and checking people’s temperatures.” The general sentiment that emerged from the respondents was that the members of the VOPEs, in their communities, acted as change agents during this crisis.

There are indications that some VOPEs attempted to produce M&E-related information intended to influence decision-making during the pandemic. One of the VOPE members conducted a study focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on the public and the use of indicators. Another member generated COVID-related data by surveying M&E practitioners using messaging apps, namely Telegram and WhatsApp. We believe this useful information will strengthen our profession in dealing with the crisis in the unforeseen future. These are indications (supported by general feedback provided by the respondents) that some VOPEs did investigate the impact of the COVID-19 but have yet to use these datasets to inform decision-making in the current crisis. It appears that most VOPEs were mainly inward-looking as opposed to producing knowledge systems that could be used in the broader national evaluation ecosystem. It is anticipated that the lessons learned from the current crisis will help VOPEs to develop readily available tools and techniques to be used during crisis scenarios, including the utility of evidence discourse.

Conclusion

VOPE activities in Africa during the pandemic appear to have been piecemeal and uncoordinated. As with most CSOs in Africa, VOPEs were forced to reorient and respond to local and immediate needs, they had to work in partnership with other organizations, and they had to adapt to new modes of engagement. The adaptation, according to respondents, was slow and limited in many cases. Many VOPEs have explored technology to advance a hybrid of activities, and although many more people are connecting online, it is still limited. Most significant. However, this exercise noted that individual VOPE members (from their convictions and not necessarily mandated by their VOPEs) have been instrumental in championing social programs geared to aid the poorer members of society.
The preponderance in Africa of independent consultants that is, M&E activities responding to specific RFPs has been signaled as a concern. The concern relates to the lack of space for knowledge generation as the contracts prescribe the scope and focus of the exercises that are generally in the interest of clients calling for the evaluation. The creative use of technology is encouraging, but there is recognition technology that may exclude many people from the learning or development process. The YEE example alerts us that even young(er) people have limited access to technology.

The state of VOPEs in Africa is far from ideal, and there are many challenges related to sustainability and growing evaluation as a discipline in Africa. Be it a response to the pandemic or assuming the mantel of championing evaluation and good governance, VOPEs must consistently provide knowledge of the local population groups in relation to policies, as suggested by Chalmers (2000) articulated in the ‘Made in Africa’ initiative.

As a guide to professionals, VOPEs must strive to provide information about good practices or how problems have been addressed in other places. For example, what measures worked best to protect the health of individuals during the Ebola epidemic? What local mechanisms best served local communities and why? What are the emerging best practices in the health, welfare, education, economic sectors at local and national levels? How will VOPEs ensure that they are focused and that they are relevant? VOPEs should learn from the experiences of other CSOs in Africa during this period, where the full use of networked communities to pool resources and ideas was applied. VOPEs must contribute to transparent governing structures and policies. Our resource-constraint environments suffer under the strain of corrupt practices that prosper when protected by policies that restrict and limit the rights and voices of citizens. While in pursuit of methodological and technological solutions to the health and social problems associated with the pandemic, VOPEs should recognize that evaluation is more than the application of technical skills. It is also about reflecting on how evaluation evidence best serves democratic aims and social justice in Africa.
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References


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IDEV Publishes its 2020 Annual Report

For IDEV, 2020 turned out to be a record in terms of products delivered by exceeding its target. IDEV delivered 20 evaluation products comprised of 17 evaluations, 2 validation synthesis reports and its first Management Action Record System report, which tracks the implementation of evaluation recommendations by the Bank. During this special year which marked 40 years of the evaluation function at the AfDB, IDEV also organized eight (virtual) knowledge events to capitalize on the findings, lessons, and recommendations from various evaluations, including the Biennial AfDB Development Evaluation Week.

Through these evaluation products and events, IDEV pursued and fulfilled its mandate to contribute to learning, accountability for achieving the Bank’s High 5 priorities, and promotion of the evaluation culture both within the Bank and in our Regional Member Countries. IDEV's evaluations have proven timely and influential by identifying what works well and areas for improvement, and providing clear guidance for new policies and strategies.

IDEV will continue working on its core mandate to contribute to a better Bank, achieving greater development results for Africa.

Find out more:

African Parliamentary Efforts to Fight Corruption: Insights from Gabon and Zimbabwe

On 2 June 2021, the African Parliamentarians’ Network on Development Evaluation (APNODE) held a roundtable as part of the 2021 gLOCAL Evaluation Week, themed, ‘African Parliaments, Enhanced Oversight and the Fight against Corruption – Lessons from strengthening compliance programs.’

The event attracted dozens of attendees from across Africa. It was moderated by Karen Rot-Munstermann, Ag. Evaluator General, African Development Bank (AfDB), with Hon. Faustin Boukoubi, Speaker of the National Assembly of Gabon and Hon. Brian Dube, Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee of Zimbabwe Parliament (representing Hon. Adv. Jacob Francis Mudenda, Speaker of Parliament).

The discussion highlighted the way corruption affects and hampers development, as well as the living conditions of populations on the continent. The dialogue revolved around the oversight role of parliaments, who play an essential role in fighting corruption by way of their compliance mechanisms, thereby enhancing accountability and transparency in government.

Following a fruitful conversation, the distinguished speakers recognized the efforts of APNODE to create an environment of exchange and peer learning for parliamentarians, which has contributed to enhancing the capacities of parliamentarians and parliaments.

Find out more:
APNODE Leads Discussion on Role of African Parliamentarians in Post COVID-19 Recovery

On 4 June 2021, APNODE held a roundtable as part of the 2021 gLOCAL Evaluation Week themed ‘The Role of Parliamentarians in Africa’s post-COVID-19 Recovery.’ Moderated by Josephine Watera, Head of M&E, Parliament of Uganda, the event’s distinguished panelists were Sen. Langton Chikukwa, Senate of Zimbabwe and APNODE Executive Committee member, Sen. Sylvia Kasanga, Senate of Kenya, Hon. Rahhal El Makkaoui, House of Councillors of Morocco and APNODE Executive Committee member, and Mr. Germain Mbav Yav, Advisor to the Research Department of the Senate of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and APNODE Member.

The event attracted over 35 attendees, panelists shared insights on their respective country situations regarding the efforts being made to contain the spread and impact of COVID. Drawing from their own experience, they detailed the different measures undertaken by their parliaments during the pandemic. They shared their views on strengthening these efforts by highlighting different needs, such as the need for better collaboration between parliament and the executive to enhance efficiency in service delivery.

Following the interventions by the panelists, the discussion was opened to accommodate questions from the audience. The ensuing interaction brought additional insights into the discussion, including actions MPs should undertake to ensure a meaningful post-COVID-19 recovery. Some participants also used the opportunity to engage with the panelists and share additional country experiences.

Launch of the Arabic Translation of the Revised International Evaluation Criteria and Definitions

On 28 June 2021, the Arabic version of the international evaluation criteria was officially launched to reach as many people as possible across the Arabic-speaking world and promote participation and inclusion. This follows the decision by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) to translate the international evaluation criteria promoted into different languages to ensure that these criteria are widely applicable.

A joint initiative by the AfDB through IDEV, the Islamic Development Bank, the OECD-DAC Evaluation Network, and United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, led this translation of the revised evaluation criteria into Arabic.

IDEV has been making extra efforts to strengthen evaluation use through accessibility. For example, the Executive Summary of its recent evaluation of the AfDB’s country strategy and program in Egypt was translated into Arabic in addition to French and English. Such initiative will enable the key messages of this evaluation to be widely disseminated by the AfDB’s Egypt Country Office.

Find out more:
Event: 6th Annual General Meeting of APNODE

On 26-27 August 2021, the 6th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the African Parliamentarians’ Network on Development Evaluation (APNODE) took place virtually, under the theme ‘Enhancing Parliamentary Oversight and Capacity for Action during COVID-19: Lessons from Africa”. Hosted by IDEV, the event attracted approximately 45 participants from over 17 countries.

The two high-level panels enabled discussions around the importance of parliamentary action in times of crisis and ways of addressing citizens’ needs in these times. They also focused on the oversight role of Members of Parliament, and their oversight of the Executive.

The AGM was an opportunity for APNODE members to review the Report of the 5th AGM, the Network’s Strategic Plan 2017–2020 and Work Plan 2018-2020, as well as to plan for the next three years (2021-2024). Moreover, this was also a special AGM, voting in a new Executive Committee for the period 2021–2023.

The next AGM is planned to occur in 2022 in Rabat, Morocco, hosted by the House of Councillors.

Find out more:
Impact Evaluation of the AfDB-funded Ghana Fufulso-Sawla Road Project

This report estimates the average impact of all components of the Fufulso-Sawla Road Project in Ghana, worth USD 156 million, on development outcomes. It aimed to generate lessons and provide recommendations to maximize the impacts of ongoing and future inclusive and integrated infrastructure projects. The evaluation assessed the results of the project by responding to the overarching question, “what are the differences made by the Bank-supported integrated infrastructure project in Ghana?”.

Find out more:


Synthesis Report on the Validation of 2018 Project Completion Reports (PCRs)

This report synthesized findings from the validation of 65 PCRs prepared in 2018. The evaluation assessed results of the 2018 PCR evaluation notes (PCRENs) focusing on the PCR quality, and the performance of the projects, Bank and borrowers. It provides key lessons for improving the quality of PCRs and project results performance. Each PCR was assessed based on four criteria: monitoring and evaluation (M&E) quality, PCR quality, PCR-PCREN ratings and PCR compliance.

Find out more:

Synthesis Report on the Validation of 2014–2019 Expanded Supervision Reports (XSRs)

This report synthesized findings from the validations of 46 of the 73 XSRs produced over the period, which represent 63% coverage by volume. The report assessed compliance with the Bank’s XSR process, the quality of the XSRs, the development outcome of Bank interventions, and the Bank’s investment profitability, work quality and additionality. In addition, the report identified key lessons and success factors that contributed to positive results, including working with good sponsors, establishing good front-end work, and integrating non-lending assistance.

Find out more:


Evaluation of the AfDB’s Engagement with Civil Society

IDEV evaluated the Bank’s engagement with Civil Society at the corporate, regional member country, and project levels over the period 2012-2019. The evaluation examined the extent to which the Bank’s conceptualization of Civil Society Engagement (CSE) has been relevant and coherent, and how effectively and efficiently CSE has been operationalized in the Bank, based on the Bank’s CSE Framework. This evaluation will facilitate the effective implementation of the Bank’s CSE Action Plan (2019–2021) and inform the design of a new AfDB CSE Strategy.

Find out more:

Evaluation of Mainstreaming Green Growth and Climate Change (GG-CC) into the AfDB’s Interventions

To improve the performance of the Bank in mainstreaming GG-CC considerations into its policies, strategies and operations, IDEV evaluated the Bank’s efforts to mainstream Green Growth and Climate Change between 2008 and 2018. The evaluation assessed the extent to which the Bank has mainstreamed GG-CC into its interventions (policies, strategies, operations); the performance of the Bank’s projects which have mainstreamed GG-CC, and factors of success and/or failure of GG-CC mainstreaming, to understand what works and what does not work, why and in what context. The lessons, good practices, and recommendations formulated will enable the Bank to improve the quality and performance of its interventions and inform the new climate change and green growth policy and strategy framework currently being developed.

Find out more:


Evaluation of Mainstreaming Green Growth and Climate Change into the AfDB’s Interventions: Energy and Transport Cluster

This project cluster evaluation of the African Development Bank’s support for and mainstreaming of Green Growth and Climate Change into its energy and transport interventions is a building block in the overall corporate evaluation of mainstreaming GG-CC into the AfDB’s interventions. It covers seven energy and transport projects in five countries: Cameroon, Morocco, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Senegal, for a total value of UA 394.4 million. This cluster evaluation is one of the corporate evaluation’s six building blocks, contributing to the overarching aim to improve the quality and performance of the Bank’s interventions and inform the new climate change and green growth policy and strategy framework.

Find out more:

Evaluation of the AfDB’s Country Portfolio Review and Restructuring Policy

IDEV evaluated the AfDB’s Portfolio Review and Restructuring Policy and its implementing guidelines, over the period 2011 – 2019. The evaluation assessed the portfolio review and restructuring policy and guidelines of the Bank as they have evolved over the years, how they have been implemented, to what extent they achieved their objectives, whether they have been an efficient instrument for portfolio management, and how they compared with those of similar organizations and with good practice standards. It provided evidence to inform the revision of the portfolio review and restructuring policy and its related guidelines, given the Bank’s evolving institutional environment.

Find out more:

**Volume 2021: Civil Society in Evaluation**

In this edition of Evaluation Matters, we reflect on the role of civil society in evaluation, showcasing examples of partnerships with CSOs in evaluation, as well as explore how National Statistical Offices can support citizen-generated data by CSOs to improve the monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs. We also present IDEV’s recent evaluation of the AfDB’s engagement with CSOs, exploring opportunities and challenges associated with the unique methodology of this evaluation, which helped ensure that civil society views and opinions were collected and reflected in the evaluation.

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**Evaluation Week 2020 special edition**

As part of the UN’s ‘Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030’, a global call was made for timely data and evidence-based policymaking to boost progress on the SDGs. A core part of the evidence base for decision making and development programming can be drawn from evaluation. In this context, the AfDB’s biennial Development Evaluation Week (2–4 December 2020) focused on how effective learning from evaluation is linked to the delivery of sustainable development results. This issue of eVALUation Matters adds to the discourse that took place at Evaluation Week 2020 and takes a deep dive into some of the key issues discussed during the event.

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This edition explores how the fourth industrial revolution, digitization and the associated boom in disruptive technologies are shaping the practice of evaluation primarily in Africa, and its implications for the African Development Bank’s work.

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**First Quarter 2020: Promoting an Evaluation Culture in 2020 and Beyond**

A “culture of evaluation” is often lauded as a key solution to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of governments, development organizations and international financial institutions alike.
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