This article introduces the *Evaluation of the African Development Bank (AfDB)’s Engagement with Civil Society*, the first of its kind led by Independent Development Evaluation (IDEV) at the AfDB. It briefly sets out aspects and challenges associated with the unique methodology of this evaluation, which helped ensure that civil society views and opinions were correctly collected and reflected. It also presents selected findings and concludes with some key lessons and recommendations.
In the late 1990s, the African Development Bank Group (AfDB) first outlined its approach to engaging with civil society by releasing the “Policy and Guidelines for Cooperation with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)”. In 2012, following several other milestones, a Civil Society Engagement (CSE) Framework was adopted, and a civil society division was created in 2016. In 2020, Independent Development Evaluation (IDEV) assessed the Bank’s engagement with civil society during the design and implementation of its strategies and interventions and in the Bank’s processes, to learn about the successes and challenges of implementing the CSE Framework. The evaluation used a combination of evaluation approaches and mixed methods, with triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data.

For the purpose of the CSE evaluation, data on experiences, views and perceptions of civil society were collected in different ways. First, civil society representatives participated as interviewees and focus group discussion participants. Second, an online survey gathered the feedback of 290 individuals representing various types of civil society organizations (for comparison, there were 203 respondents from staff/consultants within the Bank). Third, two CSO representatives were included in the evaluation reference group, which is uncommon for other IDEV evaluations. Fourth, a sample of country program strategies and project portfolio documents were analyzed across five countries to assess the quality, the type and the frequency of CSE throughout the formulation and implementation of the AfDB country strategy and project cycle. Finally, the evaluation collected and analyzed civil society publications regarding the AfDB in particular and their criticisms towards IFIs in general, including the way it was addressed in Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network reviews.

During the evaluation process, the following key opportunities and challenges of this methodology were noted:

- The participation of civil society was crucial and central to the validity of the evaluation, since it was about AfDB engagement with them, and the results were intended to facilitate and benefit the quality of such engagement. Contrasting opinions from civil society members and AfDB staff about the Bank’s engagement across corporate, country, and project levels and mechanisms (communication, dialogue, partnership) helped corroborate results.

- Translating the survey instruments for civil society into three regional languages (English, French and Portuguese) and holding interview and focus group sessions in English and French allowed for contextualized responses.

- After significant effort, a wide range of civil society actors responded to the online survey, including Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs), CSO, international Non-Governmental Organizations (iNGOs) and academics, among others. The overall response rate was low (6%), even though a variety of Bank mediums.

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were used to send invitations to 4,849 individuals all across Africa. The majority of respondents to the surveys of Bank staff/consultants and civil society were from Côte d’Ivoire and West Africa. A conscious effort was undertaken to balance geographical representation through interviews and online consultations.

Community-based organizations (CBOs), whose role was documented as significant in the implementation of many Bank projects especially in agriculture and water & sanitation, were hard to reach, partially due to a lower access to technology when compared to iNGOs and CSOs. Travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic impeded the evaluation team from carrying out two (of five) country visits.

Women were underrepresented among civil society actor respondents to the online survey (28%), reflecting their underrepresentation in leadership roles both among CSOs and among the Bank’s staff (39% female respondents).

The civil society interviewees and online survey respondents were generous in sharing their thoughts. Honesty was remarkable and critical and constructive reflections and suggestions were shared about the Bank’s engagement, highlighting shortcomings while acknowledging positive efforts. Notably, more than half (55%) of online survey respondents indicated they had never had an interaction with the Bank. Indeed, among the Civil Society respondents that were selected from 35 countries and were drawn from different databases, some were drawn internally from the Bank, but others were selected externally as recommended by other stakeholders.

Notable evaluation findings concerning the AfDB’s engagement with civil society include:

- The broad definition of civil society stemming from the 1999 Policy has captured the diversity of civil society actors, with whom the Bank has engaged at various levels and through various mechanisms. In recognizing the wide spectrum of civil society actors, the AfDB was coherent with its external discourse on civil society. While a clear and broad definition of civil society at the AfDB has existed since the adoption of the 1999 Policy, its understanding varied considerably among AfDB staff, national stakeholders and civil society themselves. In addition, during discussions with staff in the AfDB’s regional offices and at HQ, it was emphasized that the definition of civil society according to local legislation, its level of independence, and the state of freedom in each context should be reflected in the Bank’s CSE framework, as engagement mechanisms will differ accordingly.

- The evaluation found that internal and external collaborations and partnerships were a substantial driver in enhancing meaningful CSE by the AfDB, albeit often without formalities or a strong selectivity. The evaluation identified various types of partnerships between the AfDB and civil society actors (project implementation contracts, grant agreements, MOUs, etc.), but beyond a few examples, documented evidence of formal partnerships between civil society and the AfDB is sparse. Both formal and informal partnerships were largely conducted through joint activities, with more than a quarter (27%) of CSO survey respondents having first engaged with the Bank at its CSO Open Days®, the CSO Forum®, or at conferences.

- The evaluation found an inconsistency between survey results and portfolio reviews concerning the role played by civil society actors across the
**AfDB project cycle.** From both the survey results and portfolio review, the evaluation found that CSOs are the connection between the Bank and communities, especially those benefitting from or affected by projects financed by the Bank. Furthermore, both CSOs (89%) and Bank staff (77%) are confident of CSOs ability to execute and implement projects. However, limited evidence was found of CSOs actually implementing projects. The project portfolio analysis of almost 100 projects indicated that CSE often occurred in project design, but significantly less in project implementation, monitoring and evaluation. In fact, 16% of staff survey respondents indicated that the first contact with a CSO was at project preparation level. Projects which involve CSOs at the design stage usually target specialized grassroots CSOs that are considered relevant to the project subsector and serve as a bridge to the project beneficiaries (i.e. farmers or water user associations in rural areas).

**The CSO Forum has been the most sustained example of corporate level dialogue by the AfDB with civil society.** The first CSO Forum was held in 2009 in connection with the Bank’s Annual Meetings, which was even before the release of the CSE Framework. The concept note, the outline of the CSO Forum’s program and the identification of CSO contributors took into account the criteria of reputation and geographical coverage. However, there was no evidence of participation by civil society in those preparation processes. The spectrum of participating CSOs did not reflect the diversity of the African continent, and the Bank’s geographic coverage. At the same time, the call for proposals was publicly available, thus opening it up to a wide range of actors. The 2018 and 2019 CSO Fora in Abidjan showed over-representation of West African civil society, with very limited representation from Central and North Africa and in particular Lusophone Africa.

**Evidence of successful collaboration with civil society was primarily related to CBOs and was mostly found in the areas of water supply, sanitation and agriculture.** Portfolio reviews carried out under the framework of the case studies show several activities involving civil society. The role assigned to CSOs was primarily related to taking care of outreach activities and as beneficiaries of capacity building and to a lesser extent as project implementers. Across multiple lines of evidence, the role of civil society in monitoring projects appeared to be interchangeably used for monitoring projects’ socio-economic impacts. Evidence of either was almost non-existent, and calls for capacity building were plentiful.

**Research, evaluation and knowledge generation and brokerage were found to be mutually beneficial.** The relevance and importance of strategically partnering with academia was notable, but the lack of operationalized procedures limited strategic linkages to the broader CSE agenda.

Together with AfDB country and regional offices, the **CSO Committee representatives from the Bank were perceived to be the most important channels to learn about the Bank.** In the CSO survey, civil society representatives on the CSO Committee were ranked as the fifth most useful source of information about the AfDB. Furthermore, the evaluation found that at country and regional levels, the AfDB offices do not engage with CSOs in a sustained way. Even though Country Strategy Papers (CSPs) and Regional Integration Strategy Papers (RISPs) drive country and regional engagement with the Bank, CSP development processes failed to establish an institutional set-up.
at country level that allowed for a significant policy dialogue between civil society, the government, and other stakeholders.

Limited data from outreach activities is hindering the learning opportunities from CSO Open Day implementation, with the exception of Burkina Faso. In fact, documents were missing for CSO Open Days (i.e., attendance list) and, as a result, targeting those CSOs to collect information about the relevance and effectiveness of such events was constrained. The case of the CSO Open Day that was organized in Burkina Faso (March 2019) demonstrates that outreach activities such as these can lead to building relevant and continuous engagement that is adapted to the context. In this case, a joint CSO-AfDB committee was created to monitor the recommendations that emerged from discussions and documented in the event report.

The evaluation found divergent opinions across civil society on how well the AfDB compares to other multilateral institutions. Almost 68% of the respondents to the CSO survey thought that the AfDB performed better or substantially better than others such as ECOWAS, UNDP and IFAD in terms of collaboration and promptness of engagement with civil society. The caveats expressed centered on a few areas, such as engagement in country-level processes, the lack of funding windows, and limited appreciation by civil society actors of the Bank’s operational modalities. The survey confirmed that the ability to finance civil society was an important factor (entities that were cited as being capable of funding CSOs include the EU, UNICEF and USAID).

Civil society actors proved to be a force for bringing forward proposals and recommendations. Both information collected from the survey and interviews with civil society actors enabled to inform the evaluation design and helped to better understand perspectives regarding relevance and coherence of the Bank’s approaches to CSE, facilitators and barriers in the implementation to-date, and associated processes. Civil society organizations’ voices and views were crucial in doing this evaluation as they are primarily concerned.

A few examples of key lessons and recommendations from the evaluation include the following:

**Enhance awareness and common understanding of the purpose and potential value-added of CSE to the Bank’s mandate by:**

- Communicating more widely the guiding documents, tools and mechanisms for CSE (CSO database, CSO Forum, CSO Committee, etc.) among Bank staff, as well as CSOs, through the use of appropriate media (e.g., internal and external outreach events, publications, website, and mainstream and social media).

- Strengthening internal collaboration across the Bank’s departments to consolidate CSE efforts by creating adequate space and relevant incentives.

- Developing an M&E framework for CSE that clarifies CSOs’ role, the Bank’s spheres of influence, dimensions of expected change, and indicators to monitor and measure results.

- Integrating the CSE output and outcome indicators into the Bank’s Results Framework.

- Prioritizing learning and knowledge management around CSE.

**Enhance the resourcing approach for effective implementation of CSE by:**

- Developing operational guidelines to accompany the Bank’s strategic
commitment to CSE at the three levels (corporate, country and project) and across existing engagement mechanisms (including communication and outreach, consultation and dialogue, and partnerships).

- Exploring alternative funding sources such as Thematic Trust Funds for projects that either involve CSOs as implementing agents or as beneficiaries.

- Ensuring adequate staffing at Bank headquarters and regional levels (including engagement of focal points at the country level) with clearly defined roles and responsibilities to foster the CSE agenda.

**Strengthen CSE in policy dialogue at the country and regional levels to contribute to the Bank’s agenda of inclusive growth and good governance** by:

- Providing clear guidance to foster CSE in policy dialogue in the new CSE strategy and operational guidelines.

- Setting up institutional arrangements at the country level to facilitate policy dialogue between the Bank, CSOs, governments and other stakeholders.

- Systematizing and regularize CSO open days at the country level to foster partnerships.

The evaluation team made particular efforts to seek out and include the views of civil society in this evaluation, and very much valued the engagement with civil society representatives throughout the evaluation process. We advise to read the full evaluation report and the annexes, which provide a snapshot of the respondents from civil society on the continent whose views and experiences were core to shaping the content of the report.
Endnotes

1. A theory-based approach; a Utilization-Focused Evaluation approach and a case study approach.

2. The evaluation team worked with the IT department at the Bank to administer the online survey. The survey was tested in collaboration with Bank staff/consultants and CSOs in English, French and Portuguese (CSO Survey only). The feedback from the pilot was used to refine and finalize the survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary as well as confidential. A total of 4849 individuals representing CSOs were invited to participate, 290 responded, therefore a response rate of 6% to the CS survey. A set of interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized afterwards with the survey respondents (CSO and Staff) who expressed the willingness to be contacted for a deeper discussion with the evaluation team.


4. These include but go beyond overall limitations of the Evaluation of the AfDB's CSE.

5. AfDB CSO database, sampled 35 countries = 2500; original list from CSO forum list = 454; BCRM database = 341; IDEV database = 794; ECNR = 209; Lists of participants from anticorruption day in Tunis, constituency lists from selected CSO committee members, participants of CSO side events at Global Gender Summit, CSOs consulted during the development of 3 country gender profiles; participants from CSO Open days in Mauritius, African VOPE list, climate day in Abidjan, governance team, etc. = approximately 550 = 4849

6. Civil Society Open Days are organized once a year in each of the African Development Bank's regional offices. Civil Society Organizations are invited to engage in country dialogue and be consulted on the African Development Bank's country strategy for their country. All of the AfDB's policies and strategies are systematically submitted to Civil Society to ensure transparency and accountability in regional member countries.

7. The Annual Civil Society Forum which brings together Civil Society representatives, AfDB senior Management and Staff Members, and government officials is a preferred platform to engage in a high level dialogue on areas of collaboration between the African Development Bank and Civil Society Organizations.

8. CSO Forum Capitalization exercise, 2019 (internal report)

9. The AfDB-Civil Society Committee’s mandate is to advise the African Development Bank on forging stronger relations and partnerships with the Civil Society Organizations community, and to help hold AfDB accountable for the implementation of the Civil Society Engagement Strategy and related Work Plan

10. First three sources were: government in the country (24%), other civil society actors and development partners (18% each)

11. A Monitoring Committee composed of executives from the Bank Country Office and CSOs was set up. The Committee consists of three members from CSOs and two members from the AfDB Country Office.
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