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Evaluating the AfDB “High 5’s”: Bifocal lenses assessment via citizen participation

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Abstract

The thought of evaluating the AfDB high 5’s is tempting. It is, in fact, a herculean task and cannot just be achieved using a blanket approach or be dismissed with the common approach “...difficult is done at once; the impossible takes a little longer”. In reality, evaluating these high priority areas will involve much rigour and will involve finding that one area that is lacking but can improve on with a single change of lenses, consequently improving circumstances drastically. The high 5’s garner much attention in headlines, much is said about it, talks, seminars, and — who knows — maybe even an *evaluation week*. *When was the last time a member of the African community, an ordinary citizen -the perceived recipients of these “high 5’s”- tasked with the responsibility of evaluating these five top priority areas? When again have the members of the African populace been actively engaged not only the evaluation but the continued implementation of these focus areas?* The task of transforming the African continent, which is the aim of the high 5’s, is not mutually exclusive but rather inclusive, requiring extensive collaboration and participation, with huge benefits for all stakeholders. There is no room for isolation, for either implementers or evaluators. Drawing on the proceedings from the recent Annual Development Effectiveness Review 2016 by the AfDB, it is evident that the review has an undertone of a one-sided analysis by experts. This paper, however, will articulate a different argument. It operates on the premise that no eyeglasses have one lens, they usually have two. *The current evaluation method may fit something of the format of a multinational CSR review or progress report, lacking the pluralistic approach that challenges conventional assessment models and provides insights into the truths about society view the activities of the AfDB high 5’s.* This paper examines how utilising bifocal evaluation mechanisms will challenge these big ideas: is it worth it allowing citizens participate in the assessment process? Moreover, it suggests that the future of evaluation of the “high five” does not only lie with the AfDB, but perhaps the answer lies in the acknowledgement of the fallibility of unidirectional appraisals. Two heads are better than one.

One-sided policy evaluation: Why change the norm?

It is possible to argue that “experts should do evaluation”, and it is almost preposterous to argue otherwise. If one were to liken evaluation to a medical doctor’s appointment, the AfDB would be the doctor, and the patient would be the citizens of the African continent, particularly its residents. However, in this case, it is interesting that it is only the doctor (and possibly other “medical experts”) who evaluate whether or not the patient’s treatment has been effective. The patient is not allowed to state if s/he is feeling better, allergic to some of the treatment administered or has even developed other symptoms. The one-sided evaluation process of diagnosis of the patient’s condition is similar to the current assessment methodology employed at the AfDB, and quoting from the Annual Development Effectiveness Review 2016 “The ADER helps us to reflect on our performance...” (AfDB ADER 2016, pg. 11, paragraph 1), it is representative of the self-assessment role being played by the bank in its activities. The quoted text shows that the AfDB also takes the responsibility of evaluating itself, depicting a single narrative, void of input from the recipients of the high 5’s.

This method of evaluation appears not only unsustainable but raises concerns about transparency. It calls to question the metrics used for appraisals (-what), the motive for their choice (-why), and which stakeholders provided feedback for the assessment (-who). At this point, it is imperative to recount the high 5’s for the benefit of the reader: Light up and power Africa, Feed Africa, Industrialise Africa, Integrate Africa, and Improve the quality of life for the people of Africa. These five areas are of high priority to Africans, and since they are the recipients of these activities, they should also form a crucial part of its evaluation. Thus, having a single evaluation mechanism poses many questions, context-specific and may not be suitable for evaluating the actual impact of these high 5’s in reality.

The people? Do we need them in evaluation?

To many, getting feedback from recipients of developmental initiatives may seem mundane or absurd, and it may merely add to a long list of untested options that are presumed to produce unreliable results in reality. Ideally, there should be some form of eutaxy when involving the citizens in the evaluation process, as there are many pros and cons to this inclusion. It is imperative to state that some institutions such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have made efforts to incorporate more citizen involvement in its environmental protection programs (Fiorino 2000). Proponents of enhanced citizen participation have consciously pointed out that involving citizens actively and engaging them is better than allowing them to be passive (Putnam 1995, King, Feltey and Susel 1998), and the AfDB reporting framework would benefit immensely from it. Actively conducting the high 5's assessment using the citizenry lenses will offer additional insights to blind spots that have otherwise been ignored using single lenses. Irvin & Stansbury (2004) posit that fostering citizen participation will allow formulated policies (-the high 5's in this context) to become realistically grounded in citizen preferences making the citizenry prone to become more sympathetic evaluators of the tough decisions taken by the administrators (-AfDB in this case).

Citizen participation in the evaluation process will also engender increased support from the public, resulting in fewer divisions and distrust, since the people are actively involved in the process. The fact that citizens can contribute to the evaluation of the high 5's will complete the AfDB's commitment to what the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*¹ refers to as the four fundamental principles of international development organisations—accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion. Allowing citizens participate and be included in the evaluation will be a giant leap forward for the bank, making them key stakeholders in the

¹ Carothers, T., 2014. Accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion

development process. Citizens need to be able to provide their initial feedback on the high 5's and the benefits or shortcomings of its implementation, helping the AfDB identify real issues within the application of the policies. Without this interaction, the evaluation process will lack the foundation data upon which the improvements can be made, and real-time impact may not be adequately measured. With it, optimism is higher that the question of what the high 5's is accomplishing will be systematically addressed, with strict attention being paid to their connections to the citizenry, who should be on the receiving end of the initiatives.

Citizenship inclusion in evaluation? Can we trust our citizens to evaluate the High 5's?

“.....as part of our commitment to being transparent and accountable across our operations, the ADER is written in a non-technical manner, so as to be accessible to our partners and stakeholders in Africa and beyond.” ADER Report 2016, Introduction page 11 (Atchia, S. et al., 2016)

In the above statement, the “stakeholders in Africa” would include the citizenry, highlighting that the AfDB seeks to make the evaluation reports available and accessible to the African populace. Automatically, the boxes for *accountability and transparency* are ticked. Albeit, the part of *inclusion and participation* is being left out, if citizens are not actively allowed to participate in the assessment of the high 5's, sending across a dictatorial undertone rather than democratic. Furthermore, restricting the high 5's to citizenry scrutiny may suggest a reluctance to external evaluation, watering down the accountability strand and reducing the AfDB's commitment to their citizens to “information-only”. In other words, it sorts of sends the message across that *“citizens only have a right to know what the AfDB did...citizens.' Opinions are not needed as to whether the bank underperformed or measured up”*.

Pessimists may argue that the absence of a systematic, widely agreed upon citizen participation criteria for evaluation AfDB programs do not exist, but this may just be the perfect opportunity

to create one. Creating this scheme of assessment will not necessarily mean that current strategies have been widely subjective and politically opportunistic, but will assure locals that they are being considered as part of the evaluative dialogue, and eventually influencing decision-making.

King and Stivers (1998) posit that increasing citizen participation could reduce the deterioration in public trust, and this will be pivotal for improved confidence in the commitment of the AfDB to transparency and accountability. In the same vein, Nelson and Wright (1995) agree that a citizen participation process is a veritable tool for effecting social change. Other authors such as Thomas (1995) and Beierle (1999) also support the move to encourage citizen involvement due to its propensity to produce better decisions and its ability to increase efficiency. When the evaluation is done with the collaboration of the citizens, there will be two major tiers of outcome from such assessments: heightened confidence in the evaluation process; and a boost in credence of the assessment outcomes.

With increased citizen participation, there will be reduced scepticism when reading the ADER reports, because citizens are confident that the preparation of the reports was inclusive, and they participated in the assessment.

Citizen participation in evaluation: The Good, the bad and the ugly

The attraction of focusing on the benefits of citizen participation is understandable. Disrupting the current model of the assessment is appealing, for one. However, it is not wise to consider the benefits inherent in using bifocal lenses without identifying possible risks of its adoption. Getting citizens to engage in the evaluation process will, in fact, be a daunting task, although a fruitful one. The following are possible challenges that the AfDB may encounter if it decides to adopt a citizenry-focused evaluation scheme:

- **Protracted and costly process:** Evidently, getting a considerable amount of contribution from citizens in the evaluation process will be quite time and cost consuming. Geographical constraints, language barriers and cultural issues will need to be considered and may pose a challenge to implementation. The cost of enabling participation will also increase overall evaluation costs as opposed to decision- making by a single AfDB appointed expert.
- **Representation:** Due to the ethnic diversity of the African population, it may be challenging to reach the continent's 3000 distinct ethnic groups and 2000 languages. With such a multilingual and multicultural citizenry, it will be difficult to ensure proper representation of all the people groups in the evaluation procedures.
- **Education:** To understand the high 5's, participants will need to have obtained some education before they can be deemed as qualified evaluators. With the huge gap in education on the continent, potential evaluators or collaborators with the AfDB evaluation team may not be able to effectively carry out their duties, due to the institutional constraints.
- **Power Tussle (AfDB Vs Citizens):** It may be the case that the AfDB may feel that power has been taken from them, and now being shared with citizens in the evaluation. The AfDB evaluation experts may feel threatened, especially when there is no correlation between the assessment of the AfDB specialists and that of the citizenry. There would be an ethical dilemma on which assessment metrics to publish: The People or AfDB experts?

The above listed and more are possible problems that may be encountered if the AfDB decides to adopt a bifocal lens of evaluating the high 5's.

Alternatives? Open Data and Big Data Evaluation

One of the emerging metrics for evaluation in the current world economy is open data. In a rapidly growing information society, technology presents an excellent opportunity for the AfDB to commit to its openness to public scrutiny for assessment. The AfDB should provide data support for its activities in the high 5's, making this information available for download and such that users can interact with the data to gain better insights into it via analytics.

Means et al. (2015) highlights that since the evaluation process usually involves making a judgment about the efficiency of something (-the high 5's in this case), it will essentially consist of utility for accountability, learning and/or to improve service delivery, and usually retrospective. In the broad sense, the making data from evaluation open will contribute to the development of program theory, needs assessment, and many other parts of the program cycle. Since the AfDB evaluation team may not have huge data analytical capabilities or frameworks, making the raw data from the high 5's public will enable citizen journalists or scientists to analyse the data sets, identify trends and detect hidden correlations. The AfDB can then provide a platform for the publishing of these results, screening them for bias and sampling errors. Data from satellite imagery can also greatly help open source GIS mappers, who will be able to use independent evaluation metrics to analyse the data, relieving the bank of costly machine-based analysis. Allowing open access data would encourage transparency and would allow citizens see that the results of the high 5's remain unchanged and are without interventions of the AfDB. More access to big data (and open data) would mean that the AfDB would stop duplicating data collection functions, and focus rather on the validation role, working in collaboration with the people. Open data and big data analytics in the high 5's will also inform the AfDB on how the bank and citizens can be mutually supportive.

BIFOCAL LENSES: THE WAY OUT?

It is hard to debate the logic of involving citizens in evaluating the AfDB's initiatives, and it is much harder deciphering the viability of releasing open source data from the initiatives to the general public; however, that is the ethically acceptable thing to do. It is beneficial in numerous ways to engage the citizens in the evaluation of programs that are directed at them, and the high 5's will be an excellent place to start. If a power project commences within a community, let the residents of that community be responsible for the appraisal of the project and ratify such projects before it is operated. It is only then that the AfDB will be considered to be making real grassroots impact.

This is particularly important in communities fraught with corruption, where several projects are executed on paper but not in reality. If the AfDB lay claims to having implemented one of the high 5's in a community, let the members of the community be the judge. What the policymakers at the AfDB need now is to consciously engage the citizenry in a continuous dialogue as the assessment process goes on. People-centric metrics must be used in evaluation rather than paper-centric methods of evaluation. The AfDB should resist the temptation of the catchy, headline-making evaluation mechanisms and instead concentrate on the real stakeholders that matter – Africans. Talk to them, engage them, ask them for feedback.

The next AfDB evaluation will not entail a groundbreaking, novel approach; it should only carry undertones of the voices of the African people, their real conversations about how these high 5's affects the daily life of the normal African; not some high sounding technological jargon or terminology that can only be unravelled by people who do not live on the continent.

Evaluating the high 5's over the short and long term will not just happen by simply waving a magic wand or agreeing that something must be done to optimise the process; it goes beyond a checklist or to-do list. Evaluation cannot be subjected to easy quantification and eye-popping

figures and charts with cute designs. It demands probing, engagement with real people that may likely yield uncomfortable truths. Checking how the AfDB has performed through individual strategic targets known as the “high-5’s” will no longer suffice. The actual impact of each of the priority areas and the reach of its proceedings will need exploring. It should take into account how many watts of electricity is being generated in the Light up and power Africa area, but it may be unclear how many homes reap its consequent benefits or how much of it is lost in transmission. It may be clear how much effort is being put into the Feed Africa initiative, but it may be unclear how much of that food being produced is being lost to poor storage or natural disasters such as flooding. Africa may get increasingly industrialised but what may be obscure is how much child labourers and trafficked workers are being used to power its industrialisation. Questions need to be asked about the integration of Africa, and how this will affect our uniqueness over the long term. Ambiguities will also need to be clarified, with people still engaged on how the quality of life for the people of Africa will affect our social values and the entire societal fabric along the line.

However, is there any doubt which is more important? Isolated evaluations or inclusive reports?

The next ADER report or evaluation should target, collaborate with and engage African citizens with options for them in Kiswahili or Hausa, Afrikaans or Arabic; of course, this will not come easy. However, that is because it is being viewed through single lenses. It is time to get an extra lens so that we can see with both eyes.

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