

Shifting the Status Quo: Africa Influencing Global Evaluation Practice

Made in Africa evaluation, a specific contribution to the body of knowledge by evaluators and thought leaders informed by African worldviews and perspectives, is gaining momentum. Whilst program evaluation may be addressing the needs of international development, it has not proved as useful as it can be to others engaged with the development of the continent. African values and worldviews need to guide and shape evaluation in African contexts. Africa is influencing the global evaluation ecosystem. Evaluation in Africa is on the cusp of unprecedented changes.

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Key Messages

- African ownership of the evaluation process is important as the theory and practice of evaluation in African contexts has for a long time been externally driven.
- The extent to which African worldviews, values systems, knowledge and perspectives are incorporated in current evaluation is contested.
- African values and worldviews need to guide and shape evaluation in African contexts.
- Shifting the status quo can move evaluation enquiry towards ontological and epistemological justice.

Introduction

Unlike its earlier Euro-Western roots, evaluation is now practised in a multicultural and globalized world, touching the lives of millions of people from diverse corners of the world. The degree to which evaluation practice effectively engages with its multicultural and diverse participants has been increasingly contested. In recent years, the extent to which African worldviews, values systems, knowledge and perspectives are incorporated in current evaluation has been vigorously challenged. This comes from a real concern that whilst program evaluation may be addressing the needs of donors and international development, it has not proved as useful as it can be to African policy decision-makers and others engaged with the development of the continent.

The adopted theoretical models and approaches that are applied in the evaluation of programs in African contexts are largely dimensional and homogeneous in orientation and often provide limited insight into Africa's values, beliefs and evolving cultures.

Pluralist perspectives that build on the strengths of local knowledge and value-systems to inform credible and useful

evaluation from the viewpoint of local users are missing. This article explores why African ownership of the evaluation process is important. An argument is further made as to why African values and worldviews need to guide and shape evaluation in African contexts. It is concluded that Africa is influencing the global evaluation ecosystem. Evaluation in Africa is on the cusp of unprecedented changes.

Evaluation in African contexts has been externally driven

In the last few years there has been an increasing call for evaluation practice that is driven from an African perspective (Ofir, 2018; AfrEA, 2019; AfrEA, 2014 & AfrEA, 2007). Whilst the concept is variably named as "Africa-centric", "Afro-centric", "Africa-rooted", "Africa-led", "Made in Africa", or "decolonized evaluation", the overarching aim is to drive an evaluation agenda that is led and owned by Africans. In this context, "Made in Africa" evaluation is a specific contribution to the body of knowledge by evaluators and thought leaders informed by African worldviews and perspectives. This ownership is important since the theory and practice of evaluation in African contexts has been externally driven. This exogenous nature of ➤



► evaluation, extensively documented elsewhere (Cloete, 2016; Mouton, 2010; Mouton, Rabie, Cloete, & de Coning, 2014; Wildschut, 2014) has for a long time served the needs of external stakeholders.

Euro-Western influences and theoretical models engendered and embedded through international development efforts have largely provided inadequate and inconclusive evidence regarding program impact (Mbava & Rabie, 2018; Mbava, 2017). It has been further maintained that adopted methods in evaluation and development have not fully appreciated the complexities of fragile contexts and developing societies and have tended to focus on simple interventions rather than on the reality of complex adaptive systems (Ofir, 2013:585).

The extent to which African worldviews, values systems, knowledge and perspectives are incorporated in evaluation is contested. This inquiry is underpinned by an evolving discourse which interrogates asymmetries of power structures between the regions of the Global South and the Global North, epistemic justice and issues of identity and

representation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015:13-40). Evaluation practices that constrain or discount the prominent roles of African evaluation participants in defining thought and intellectual leadership in the evaluation process have been questioned for their relevance and responsiveness (Chilisa, 2015). It has also been argued that local evaluation participants should be conceptualized as an intrinsic part of the evaluation process rather than as mere “data sources” (Chouinard and Milley, 2018:77).

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Whilst evaluation theory and practice has North-American roots, the extent to which evaluation practices and theoretical lenses are contemplative and inclusive of ►



► those involved in the evaluation process is under interrogation.

Epistemic hegemony on evaluation theory has continued to evolve in an asymmetrical manner since methodologies are overwhelmingly still developed by evaluators and theorists in the Global North, with a view to application in the Global South (Carden and Alkin, 2012). This trend appears to be increasing rather than decreasing over time (Cameron, Mishra, & Brown, 2016).

Whilst globally, evaluation increasingly engages with multicultural and diverse stakeholders, the extent to which such engagements have influenced the theory and practice of evaluation has not been fully interrogated by the evaluation community. While this issue is gaining resonance from an African perspective, other indigenous evaluation stakeholders such as Native Americans, New Zealand Maoris and Australian Aborigines, amongst others, continue to interrogate evaluation theory and practise from the perspective of their lived experiences.

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New voices in evaluation

As a key constituency, new voices from the Global South have increasingly called for full participation in the formulation of theory and practice of evaluation as relevant to their lived realities. The Global South as an ideological expression encompasses countries that have common histories of inequalities emanating from legacies of colonialism and the impact of imperialism. This common worldview serves as a mobilizing symbol in addressing asymmetries of power including knowledge construction vis-à-vis highly industrialized countries. This identity is reified through the mobilizing force of issue-based interest ►



► groups (Alden, Morphet and Vieira, 2010:3). The policy issues are debated and interrogated in various regional structures, such as the South-to-South collaboration in Evaluation (S2SE) that seeks to disrupt and contest the epistemic dominance of the Global North in this regard. A strong and present regional African voice in S2SE, which comprises counterparts from South Asia, Asia-Pacific, the Caribbean and Latin America, is critical insofar as this serves to solidify, entrench and position Made in Africa evaluation at a global level. The collective voices of Global South evaluation, through solidarity, unanimity and diplomacy, can potentially reposition and restructure the asymmetries of power and knowledge construction, shaping a new evaluation agenda.

African values and worldviews need to guide and shape evaluation in African contexts

On the other hand, commentators have asked: whose values and worldviews inform the evaluation process and design? (Chouinard and Hopson, 2016: 248). Evaluation assesses programs, projects, policies and other interventions in order to determine their merit, worth, or value. Cognizant that evaluation inquiry and conclusions have an inherent value judgement that is both empirical and normative, we need to further ask, "Whose value system informs what is defined as evaluation evidence?" Others have further pointed out that, "the evaluator's background may be the most important determinant of the type of evaluation that is done, rather than the context and the information needs of the affected groups" (Mark, Henry & Julnes 1999:179). It is thus imperative that both the epistemological and axiological fundamentalism that informs evaluation enquiry be considered from an Africa-centric perspective.

In many African contexts, value systems play an important role in regulating social

and communal structures. Values define what is upheld as worthy and these can express points of view or convictions which people can live with, live by or even die for (Idang, 2015:101). Choices and decision-making are driven not only by the available evidence, but also by norms and standards. What then happens when such norms and standards are incongruent with local value systems? A simple adoption of evaluation practices from highly industrialized countries poses limitations and is "unsuitable in non-Western cultural contexts where totally different principles and practices prevail. A one-size-fits-all recipe for evaluation is therefore impractical" (Cloete, 2016:55).

Accepting that the evaluator brings an inherent value judgement in the evaluation processes has implications for objectivity in evaluation. The role of evaluations in appraising the merit and value of a program or policy and their concomitant roles as an important decision-making function have implications for what is deemed as legitimate and credible.

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Research suggests that this has an influence on the extent to which evaluation findings are ultimately utilized by African policy-makers and citizens engaged with the development of the continent (Mbava and Rabie, 2018; Mbava, 2017).

It is important to consider the extent to which African values and worldviews guide and shape evaluation in African contexts. Cultural norms and values, beliefs and perspectives of program participants could be the key drivers that influence participants to act in specific ways and result in the observed program outcomes. ►

► Cognitive justice: The right to interpret the world from our own vantage point

Embedding a uniquely African cognitive lens in thinking, reasoning and interpreting evaluation evidence is valid and instructive. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018:17) implores us to implicitly own and liberate our knowledge with a freedom to “think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where [we are] located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism.” In this regard, we must interrogate contextual factors that might influence evaluation methodological choices, what is construed as evidence, and whose voices are amplified in evaluation design. Actively participating in what is evaluated, actively informing how that is done, defining thought and intellectual leadership on evaluation from an African worldview gives cognitive justice to African participants in evaluation.

The African vantage point, rather than being monolithic, is multicultural and multi-dimensional, and should incorporate unique perspectives from Lusophone, Francophone and Anglophone African contexts. Enabling this cognitive justice in the theory and practice of evaluation has the potential to provide unique insights to some of the most recalcitrant developmental challenges that the African continent faces. A multiplicity of “other ways of knowing”, looking at the same issues and assessing evaluation evidence from different angles rather than from the perspective of one “universal truth” has the potential to teach the world new ways of engaging with old problems and enabling lasting and sustainable solutions to developmental challenges.

Made in Africa Evaluation: Influencing the global evaluation ecosystem

It is apparent that one of the pillars of the Made in Africa perspective includes the active participation of key stakeholders

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in the construction of what is evaluated, when, by whom and how. How then can this knowledge be infused in international evaluation practice? For example, in situations where local evaluation merely tests a theory, which has been developed in the Global North, credible and active participation of locals in the central epistemological processes as co-creators of program theory and in the evaluation process is a progressive step. Credible participation of relevant local stakeholders in evaluations, coupled with a significant engagement of various voices in knowledge generation, can move evaluation enquiry towards ontological and epistemological justice. Leveraging African values such as collective deliberation and communal decision-making in the intrinsic evaluation process guides and informs development efforts, resulting in what Ofir (2013:584) regards as evaluation for development rather than of development.

Conclusion

Africa is irrevocably influencing the global evaluation ecosystem. Global evaluation theory and practice is drawing unique insights from African evaluative thinking. Africa is teaching the world a multiplicity of “other ways of knowing”, to look at the same issues and assess evaluation evidence from different angles rather than from the perspective of one “universal truth”. Rather than perpetuating pre-formulated constructions of what is supposed to be evaluation evidence from African ►►

► contexts, Africa is shifting the status quo and influencing the global evaluation ecosystem to reconstruct evaluation evidence and knowledge in new ways.

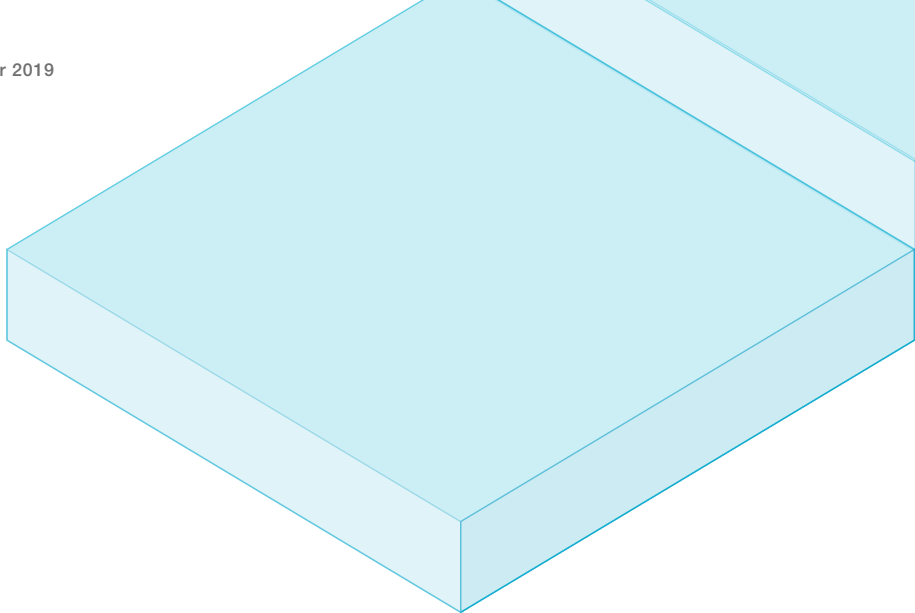
As the field of evaluation brings about cognitive justice, valuing theories, methodologies and interpretation of the world from African perspectives, the evaluation process becomes liberatory and transformative. With diverse African perspectives, which are influenced by

local cultures, value systems and customs from various contexts such as those from Lusophone, Francophone and Anglophone Africa, the potential of the continent to enrich and strengthen evaluation evidence is immense. This kind of application potentially enables lasting and sustainable solutions to some of the endemic developmental challenges that face the continent. In this regard, evaluation in Africa is on the cusp of unprecedented changes.



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Author's profile

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