

Evaluation of Development Aid: What are the Most Appropriate Approaches for Africa?

Considering the diversity of evaluation approaches, it seems appropriate to ask which ones are best suited to the African context. For the past two decades, the African continent has become increasingly interested in the practice of evaluation. Between the demands of donors and the need for accountability, Africa is looking for tools to better conduct evaluations of development aid. However, it is not only a matter of institutionalizing evaluation and importing turnkey solutions but choosing the most appropriate approaches to the local contexts. Through a review of related literature, this article proposes three approaches deemed to be best adapted to the African context. Although they were developed in the West, they strongly integrate the context and stakeholders in the evaluation process and hence, through a practical, empowerment and evolving approach, Africa can adapt them to develop more effective evaluation practices.

Salah Eddine Bouyousfi, Independent Consultant

Key Messages

- Development assistance programs take place in an open social system. This is the case of the African context, which however presents unique complexities in the implementation of programs.
- Context-based evaluative approaches and causal mechanisms provide in-depth information on whether goals are being met or not.
- Stakeholder integration and the adaptability of evaluative approaches foster ownership of evaluation results and improvement of development aid programs to more closely address the needs of local populations.

Introduction

In recent decades, international organizations and their financial oversights have paid particular attention to transparency and accountability related issues. Financial and economic crises, and the dominance of control, have accentuated this trend. As a result, an arsenal of tools, methods, standards and laws were in place to translate this trend into the field. It is in this context that the practice of evaluating policies and programs takes an important place.

Faced with a myriad of evaluation methods and approaches, choosing one method to adopt for specific programs remain a central issue in the evaluation process. In their perpetual quest for rigor in evaluation, international development practitioners recognize the delicate application of these approaches in the context of development (Ridde, 2016). Given the growing need to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of public policies, several African countries have taken a particular interest in the practice of evaluation. This trend has resulted in the proliferation of national evaluation associations and the diversification of adopted methodological approaches

(Kobiané, Kouanda & Ridde, 2016). Thus, the first conference of the African Evaluation Association (AfREA) was established in 1999 (Mathison, 2004) and the year 2003 saw the creation of the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE).

Developed in the North, the different evaluation approaches are difficult to transpose to Southern countries. The existence of gaps between what should be done ("good practices") and what is actually done ("real practices") is due to several factors: the actors and their logic, planning evaluation, and the role of development aid donors (Ridde, 2016). After assessing the situation in development aid agencies, the article proposes a methodological reflection on evaluation practices in order to determine which are best suited to the African context namely the realistic approach, the empowerment approach and the developmental approach.

Evaluation within development aid agencies

In the 1960s and 1970s, the practice of evaluation within development agencies was limited to measuring ►►

► the profitability of projects. These institutions were not particularly subject to accountability, and as a result, their interest in evaluation was, at best, ad-hoc and secondary. The 1979 oil shock triggered an international monetary crisis that prompted governments, particularly Anglo-American governments, to develop the evaluation of public policies with an objective of rationalization (Laporte, 2015). This trend resulted in the development of international “good practices” in evaluation of development aid. It was followed by the adoption, in 1991, of the Principles for evaluation of development assistance developed by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for evaluation questions.

Although this period was marked by the standardization and institutionalization of evaluation in development agencies, implementation has had two opposite but complementary approaches. The first, serving an objective of the egalitarianization of aid, is a qualitative and participative approach to evaluation, while the second, based on experimental methods, is a quantitative approach with a rationalization objective. This massive runaway for evaluation has resulted in the strong development of evaluation research, and therefore a diversity of approaches and concepts. It is in this perspective that this article proposes three approaches that seem to be, according to us - the best adapted to the African context. The first approach is the realistic approach.

The realistic approach

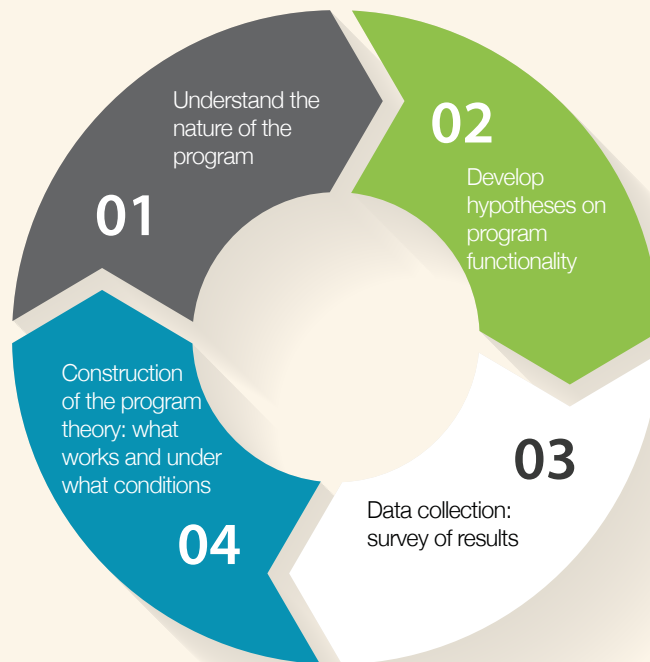
Over the last twenty years, the realistic evaluation proposed by Pawson and Tilley (1997) has been of particular interest, mainly due to the limitations of randomized experiments in testing the theory of a complex program, and subsequently measuring its long-term effects. Realistic evaluation becomes a

promising alternative to the impossibility of isolating a context or mechanism in order to randomize it. This complexity of mechanisms is due to the phenomenon of causality, the consequence of multiple factors that can interact differently and thus generate results in different ways in different contexts (Fletcher et al., 2016). It is in this perspective that the critical realism, to which the realistic approach is related, represents a promising alternative to dissect the complexity of interventions that are inherently embedded in open social systems.

In line with critical realism, the realistic approach is based on research in natural environments that contain contextual information; it employs the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Pawson et al., 2005). The objective of the realistic evaluation is to explain socially significant regularities whose underlying mechanisms are generally hidden. These are defined as elements of the evaluator's reasoning in response to an intervention (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010). This is why the realist approach is considered as a medium-range theory insofar as the knowledge produced is partially regular (Ridde et al., 2012). In an iterative process, the approach breaks down through the following steps:

- **Step 1:** The evaluator tries to understand the nature of a program based on literature reviews and interviews with program implementers;
- **Step 2:** The evaluator develops hypotheses on the mechanisms contributing to the achievement of results in a well-defined context;
- **Step 3:** The evaluator tests his/her hypotheses through a survey of the results;
- **Step 4:** Through the analysis of collected data, the evaluator devises a theory of the program, i.e. context, mechanism and outcome configurations that ►►



Figure 1: The realistic evaluation approach

- inform how the program works and under what circumstances (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007).

Pawson & Tilley advocate an iterative process. The theory of the program is thus refined throughout successive iterations. The figure below represents the realistic evaluation approach according to its authors.

On the methodology side, the majority of surveys conducted as part of a realistic approach are semi-directive interviews with a predominance of exploratory questions (Manzano, 2016) with the choice of respondents based on the researcher's assumptions. Indeed, critical realism does not attempt, unlike constructivism, to construct a reality but to test hypotheses. The purpose of the interviews is to clean the program theory first, then to refine it before consolidating the knowledge produced.

Although it generates operational results that improve programs (Punton, Vogel & Lloyd, 2016), the realistic approach

has methodological limitations and implementation constraints. In addition to the lack of pre-existing data, the approach is time and resource-consuming (Salter & Kothari, 2014). In addition, these concepts are still subject to various interpretations or operational difficulties (Pawson & Manzano-Santaella, 2012). Moreover, the dissociation of the contextual elements of the mechanisms represents a major challenge to its operationalization (Ridde et al., 2012). Lastly, the knowledge produced is difficult to transport across borders (E. De Souza, 2015).

In summary, the realistic approach aims to understand and explain, from a formative perspective, why and how a program achieves its objectives. Given the limitations of experimental evaluations to evaluate development programs, which are usually driven by hidden mechanisms, we strongly advocate the mobilization of critical realism as a conceptual framework. It seems better adapted not only to understand the social reality, but also to demonstrate the methodological ►►

► flexibility of the realistic approach that allows tools and methods to be adapted according to the specificity of the program (Pawson, 2013).

Thus, the realistic approach is a relevant tool to inform decision makers about the mechanisms and contextual factors that shape the course of an intervention. It is, therefore, in many ways an appropriate approach to deepen an understanding of development aid programs. But, Africa needs much more, its context being complex and therefore more difficult to appreciate via experimental evaluations based essentially on the predominance of numbers. However, while it is an attractive alternative, the realistic approach does not necessarily include stakeholders or, at the very least, does not specify their degree of inclusion. In this context, we propose another approach based on an inclusive approach to evaluation. This is the empowerment approach.

Collaborative approaches in evaluation: The empowerment approach

Participatory evaluation requires a thorough understanding of culture and context, which requires the adoption of participatory methods and the targeting of specific population needs (Chouinard & Cousins, 2015). Chouinard & Cousins identified three dimensions of stakeholder integration in the evaluation process. First, the degree of their diversity; second, their level of integration into the production of the evaluation; and, finally, the degree of sharing over the control of evaluation techniques.

Over and above controlling these dimensions, it is important that the majority of stakeholders agree on the objectives of the intervention. To do this, a good understanding of the complex underlying phenomena, as well as the adoption of learning as a central goal

of the assessment, is needed (Connolly et al., 2015). Several approaches are part of this logic. Among the most used is the empowerment approach designed by Fetterman.

As part of the empowerment approach, Fetterman has outlined guidelines for a participatory evaluation. These are built around ten principles (Fetterman, 2005):

- Improvement
- Community ownership
- Inclusion
- Democratic participation
- Social justice
- Knowledge of the community
- Evidence-based strategies
- Capacity building
- Organizational learning
- Accountability

Through these principles, the empowerment evaluation aims to improve the program as well as the skills of those who will contribute to the evaluation process (identify evaluation questions, collect and analyze data). However, to strengthen evaluation capacity, Fetterman and others advocate a holistic and systemic approach. In other words, there is also a need for participatory evaluations to provide training, technical assistance and quality improvement of the evaluation (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007). These are central requirements in the African context where cultural dimensions are strongly present. At the same time, key stakeholders need to be integrated, in a flexible manner, from the beginning of the assessment to fit the context of the intervention (Fetterman, Wandersman & Kaftarian, 2015). A flexible approach makes it possible, among other things, to mobilize the aforementioned principles. It all depends on the context and the needs of the concerned community for the intervention to be affected (Fetterman, Wandersman & Kaftarian, 2015).

The empowerment approach is more a way of thinking than a methodology ►

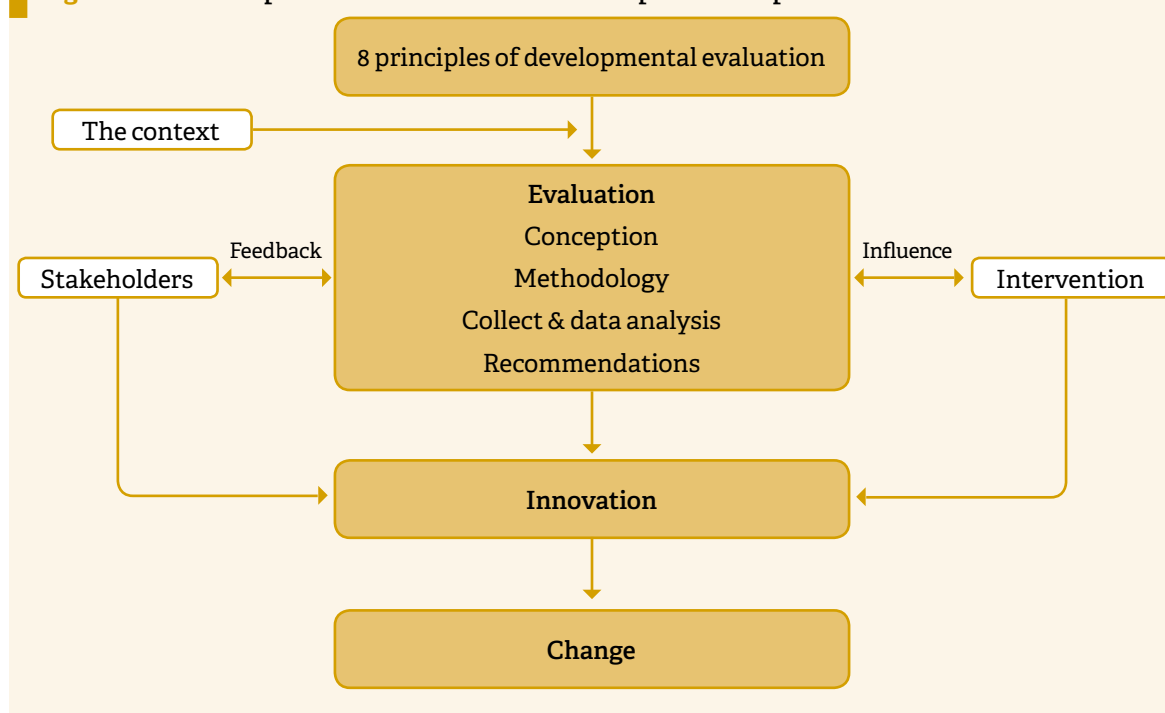
► or a concept. It primarily helps people to evaluate their own programs (Fetterman, Wandersman & Kaftarian, 2015) with a main objective of increasing the probability of achieving results by increasing the capacity of stakeholders to plan, implement and evaluate their own programs (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007). Of particular interest is the inclusion of all stakeholders, including marginalized populations, without favoring elites. This has the advantage of allowing greater ownership of results and increased program efficiency and effectiveness (Fetterman, Wandersman & Kaftarian, 2015). The choice of participants in a participatory evaluation must be based on an analysis of networks of actors, in order to avoid any instrumentalization of the evaluation and to guarantee a sufficient level of pluralism on points of view. This procedure is especially recommended in conflict situations where the interests of the various stakeholders are divergent. The goal is not just to build consensus but to bring out diversity in the issues and interests of stakeholders (Rey-Valette & Mathé, 2012).

In an empowerment evaluation, ideas, values, and practices contribute to building evaluation capacity, particularly in developing countries. It is in this perspective that the empowerment evaluation can enable African populations to better evaluate, in partnership with the donors, development aid programs. While this approach highlights the adaptive nature of evaluation design, developmental evaluation does it even better.

Developmental evaluation

The imperatives of an increasingly dynamic world have pushed evaluators to move towards a non-standard but evolving evaluation model. This provides an approach that allows for ongoing adaptation and timely decisions based on changing conditions (Patton, 2016). From this, the developmental evaluation of Patton was born. It is an innovative approach that uses adaptability and feedback to adjust to changes. Unlike traditional approaches that rely on a linear model to explain program ►►



Figure 2: The conceptual framework of Patton's adopted developmental evaluation

► outcomes, this approach is based on an adaptive development process in dynamic environments.

In Africa, the process involves diligently repeating the steps, principles and processes of a model to effectively perform an assessment. These imported models, originally designed to inform decision-makers about the merit of a program, produce simple evaluation reports at the end of an intervention. Following this, Patton proposes a systemic approach to evaluation that specifies the boundaries of a particular approach (Patton, 2016). Thus, the developmental evaluation, based on eight principles, came into being:

1. Developmental purpose;
2. Evaluation rigor;
3. Utilization focus;
4. Innovation;
5. Perspective of complexity;
6. Systems thinking;
7. Co-creation; and
8. Instant feedback (Patton, 2016)

An evaluation should be considered developmental if and only if the above

principles, interpreted and applied according to the context, are scrupulously respected. In other words, these principles will need to be explicitly contextualized in the processes, outcomes, design and use of evaluation recommendations.

Developmental evaluation implies that the innovation displayed by a program or project is evaluated in a dynamic and complex context. This is the case for social and development programs that are usually embedded in changing systems. In this case, implementation managers are always looking for innovative solutions to solve complex problems. Developmental evaluation can then be used to tailor effective and fast-moving solutions to a specific context, including crisis situations (Patton, 2016). Thus, this approach is strongly linked to innovation as all stakeholders learn, deepen their knowledge and progress. These in-depth skills and knowledge represent innovation within a particular context. Thus, developmental evaluation becomes a pillar of the intervention because it influences the intervention through instant feedback (Patton, 2016). ►



► At the methodological level, developmental evaluation follows a number of stages: (i) the description of the intervention and, above all, presuppositions of the efforts to be made to achieve the expected results; (ii) instant notification of deviations from aspirations; and (iii) review, in collaboration with the implementers, of what is working and corrective measures to close identified gaps and make necessary changes.

Traditional evaluation approaches are based on linear models with measurable results, but they can have limitations in an environment of high turbulence and rapid change. As a result, evaluators most often turn to pre-existing models, not because they are the most appropriate but because they know them (Patton, 2016). It is in this perspective that the developmental approach to evaluations represents a promising avenue in a dynamic and complex environment. The following figure represents the conceptual framework of Patton's adopted developmental evaluation.

Imported evaluation models carry a number of criticisms. Developmental evaluation represents an interesting avenue as the design of the evaluation itself is evolutionary and therefore, can easily integrate and adapt to a local African context.

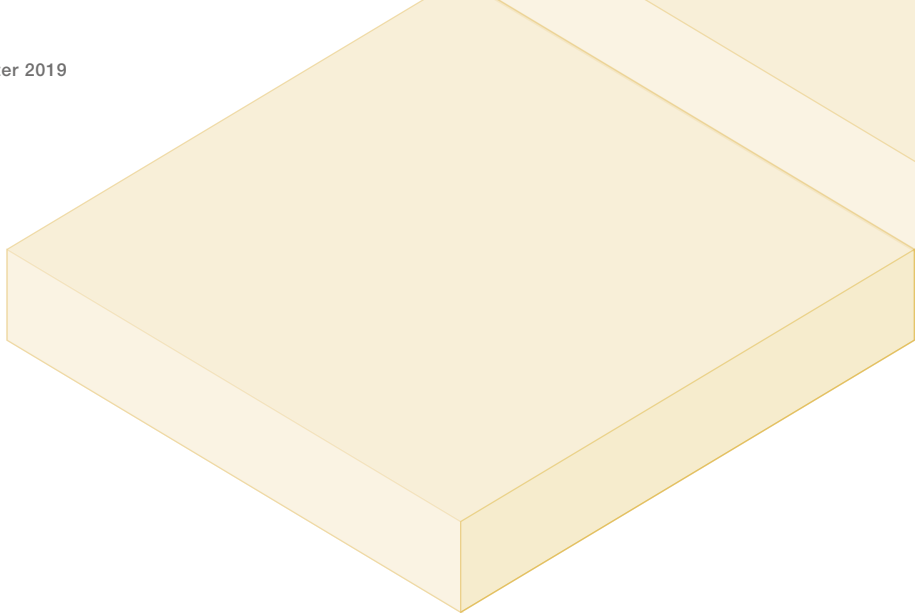
Conclusion

This article seeks to argue that by focusing on the context - and taking into account stakeholders - contextualized, participatory and adapted approaches appear to be the most appropriate for evaluations of development aid in Africa. In addition, their methodological flexibility gives them the necessary capacity to highlight the causal mechanisms of an inclusive evaluation process. These approaches are particularly relevant within the African context, which presents a set of unique complexities and where the inferential links between interventions and program results are not always easily identifiable.



References

- Astbury, B. and Leeuw, F. L. (2010) 'Unpacking Black Boxes: Mechanisms and Theory Building in Evaluation', *American Journal of Evaluation*, 31(3), pp. 363–381. doi: 10.1177/1098214010371972.
- Blamey, A. and Mackenzie, M. (2007) 'Theories of Change and Realistic Evaluation', *Evaluation*, 13(4), pp. 439–455. doi: 10.1177/1356389007082129.
- Chouinard, J. A. and Cousins, J. B. (2015) 'The journey from rhetoric to reality : participatory evaluation in a development context', pp. 5–39. doi: 10.1007/s11092-013-9184-8.
- Connolly, J., Reid, G. and Mooney, A. (2015) 'Facilitating the evaluation of complexity in the public sector: learning from the NHS in Scotland', *Teaching Public Administration*. Elsevier B.V., 33(1), pp. 74–92. doi: 10.1177/027507408101500205.
- E De Souza, D. (2015) 'Critical Realism and Realist Review : Analyzing Complexity in Educational Restructuring and the Limits of Generalizing Program Theories Across Borders', pp. 1–22. doi: 10.1177/1098214015605175.
- Fetterman, D. M. (2005), 'Empowerment Evaluation Principles in Practice', Guilford Publications, pp. 42–72.
- Fetterman, D. M., Wandersman, A. and Kaftarian, S. (2015), 'Empowerment evaluation is a systematic way of thinking: A response to Michael Patton', *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 52(August 2018), pp. 10–14. doi: 10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2015.03.004.
- Fetterman, D. and Wandersman, A. (2007), 'Empowerment Evaluation Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow', *American Journal of Evaluation*, 28(2), pp. 179–198. doi: 10.1177/1098214007301350.
- Fletcher, A. et al. (2016), 'Realist complex intervention science: Applying realist principles across all phases of the Medical Research Council framework for developing and evaluating complex interventions', *Evaluation*, 22(3), pp. 286–303. doi: 10.1002/ev.41.
- Kobiané, J.-F., Kouanda, S. and Ridde, V. (2016), *Pratiques et méthodes d'évaluation en Afrique*.
- Laporte, C. (2015), *L'évaluation, un objet politique : le cas d'étude de l'aide au développement*. Institut d'études politiques de Paris.
- Manzano, A. (2016), 'The craft of interviewing in realist evaluation', *Evaluation*, 22(3), pp. 342–360. doi: 10.1177/109821409301400302.
- Mathison, S. (2004), 'No Title', *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*.
- Patton, M. Q. (2016), 'What is Essential in Developmental Evaluation? On Integrity, Fidelity, Adultery, Abstinence, Impotence, Long-Term Commitment, Integrity, and Sensitivity in Implementing Evaluation Models', *American Journal of Evaluation*, pp. 1–16. doi: 10.1177/1098214015626295.
- Pawson, R. et al. (2005), 'Realist review – a new method of systematic review designed for complex policy interventions', *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 10(1), pp. 21–34.
- Pawson, R. (2013), *The Science of Evaluation: A Realist Manifesto*, Los Angeles, CA and London: Sage. doi: 10.1177/0020852313497455.
- Pawson, R. and Manzano-Santaella, A. (2012), 'A realist diagnostic workshop', *Evaluation*, 18(2), pp. 176–191. doi: 10.1177/1356389012440912.
- Punton, M., Vogel, I. and Lloyd, R. (2016), *Reflections from a Realist Evaluation in Progress: Scaling Ladders and Stitching Theory*.
- Rey-Valette, H. and Mathé, S. (2012), 'L'évaluation de la gouvernance territoriale. Enjeux et propositions méthodologiques', *Revue d'Économie Régionale & Urbaine - RERU*, (2012/5), pp. 783–804. doi: 10.3917/reru.125.0783.
- Ridde, V. et al. (2012), 'L'approche réaliste à l'épreuve du réel de l'évaluation des programmes', *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 26(3), pp. 37–59.
- Ridde, V. (2016), "'Bonnes", "vraies" et "quelquesmeilleures" pratiques d'évaluation de programme de développement en Afrique', Hal.
- Salter, K. L. and Kothari, A. (2014), 'Using realist evaluation to open the black box of knowledge translation: a state-of-the-art review', *Implementation Science*. doi: 10.1186/s13012-014-0115-y.



Author 's profile

Salah Eddine Bouyousfi is a project management consultant and researcher in evaluation. He is the Technical Director of a consulting and training firm based in Rabat, Morocco. He has twenty years of project management experience in human resources, logistics and training. He has carried out two program evaluations on the development of disadvantaged regions in northern Morocco and on the vocational integration of young people in difficulty in Casablanca, a part of his doctoral studies at the Center for Doctoral Studies of the Higher Institute of Commerce and Business Administration Group (ISCAE-Casablanca Group). Holding a diploma as state engineer and a Master of Business Administration from the Institut d'Administration des Entreprises de Poitier, France (IAE). He was also awarded the PMP certificate in project management issued by the Project Management Institute.

