Africa Economic Conference

Panel Discussion on Evaluation as a Driver of Economic Recovery and Long-Term Growth: Patterns and Directions in Africa

Making Evaluation Matter for Africa’s Development

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This is a conference on economics - on economic recovery and growth. Why then did OPEV decide to host a panel on evaluation? Why is this paper concerned with making evaluation matter for Africa? What does evaluation have to do with these macro-level issues of global crisis, and of Africa’s economic recovery from the crisis and future growth? In any case, wasn’t the financial crisis unique – nothing like it had happened since the Depression of the 1920s? What would evaluation have to tell us about such a one-off event?

A quick answer to some of these questions appeared in the Financial Times the other day. Not in a learned article – but in an advertisement for the School of International and Public Affairs at the University of Columbia in New York. The text of the advertisement announced in bold print:

**With over fifty financial crises in twenty-five years, it’s time to prepare yourself for a world prone to crisis.**

The advertisement lists, in a side bar, around 50 crises which took place over the period in various countries around the globe. So much for the one-off event. Given the regular recurrence of financial crisis, perhaps it would indeed be wise to prepare.

But what would evaluation tell us? Have any such evaluations been done?

Last year, the World Bank’s Independent Evaluation Group launched such an evaluation. The first step was to look back at evaluations of previous crises and the World Bank’s actions to address these – and, yes, such evaluation work had been undertaken before. Time does not permit a lengthy presentation of the findings and lessons, but the following gives a flavour:

- Speed and quality of response are both important
- Be prepared! Effective early warning mechanisms have not been put in place, despite the importance of preparedness.
- Remember to address the needs of poor people. In past crises, poverty issues were overlooked: social safety nets need to be in place from the onset of the crisis.
• Focus on results. With the premium on speed, results frameworks linking objectives, spending and benefits become even more valuable when resources become scarce.

• Address climate change and emerging environmental issues. The crisis presents opportunities as well as problems: in this case the opportunity to mobilize resources to address “green” issues.

IEG is continuing its evaluation. Other MDBs have also undertaken similar work and will present results at a conference hosted by EBRD in London at the end of November. The IMF’s evaluation office is also evaluating the IMF’s response, and will report on this next year.

The point of these studies is not to rake over the embers once the fire has been put out, or to fight battles which have already been lost or won. For one thing, the current crisis may not be over but simply in remission! But more importantly, it is critical to understand what has happened in the past if we are to find a way forward that will succeed. As the philosopher has it, “Those who do not learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeat them”.

One of the victims of the crisis has of course been the discipline of economics. Few economists saw the crisis coming; and economic theories have been widely discredited as dogmas. In a remarkable speech made at Georgetown University in Washington at the end of September, World Bank President Robert Zoellig described the recent fate of development economics as a fall “from hubris to humility”.

“Even before the crisis there was a questioning of prevailing paradigms and a sense that development economics needed rethinking. The crisis has only made that more compelling”.

He welcomes a turn towards a more empirically-based development research - but he goes on to caution against a retreat into narrow focus and methods-driven approaches:
“Too often research economists seem not to start with key knowledge gaps facing development practitioners, but rather search for questions they can answer with the industry’s currently favourite tools”.

He sketches out a range of questions for enquiry: how does economic transformation happen? Can the right industrial policies succeed? What are the right polices to attract and retain Foreign Direct Investment? What are the constraints to better service delivery and better access to finance for the poor? And so on.

Finally, he urges adoption of a research agenda that focuses on results. What works? How? And why?

Many of these questions, the focus on empirical evidence and Zoellig’s plea for work which is relevant to development policy and practice, are at the heart of evaluation work. Evaluation, by its nature, is analysis tied to real world policies and interventions. Evaluation is generally undertaken to feed lessons and recommendations back into policies and operations (even if the “transmission belt” is not always in perfect working order). And evaluation is intended to provide illumination and transparency: it is intended to promote public debate and accountability. Indeed, Zoellig went on to announce various initiatives aimed at promoting what he called “open data, open knowledge, and open solutions”. In spirit this is close to what evaluation, in its limited way, has been aiming at for the past 30 years.

The suggestion, therefore, is that in the wake of the crisis, development economics and development evaluation are perhaps more closely aligned than before. Indeed the evaluation toolkit already draws heavily on economics – although it also draws on a range of other social sciences.

So does evaluation matter for Africa’s development? Can it make a contribution to Africa’s recovery and growth? We can suggest three ways in which it does: operationally, analytically and politically.
Empirically, evaluation shows what works – and what does not work. If Africa is to resume a path of sustainable, long term growth, Africa’s decision makers need to know what is effective, and what needs to be improved, both for policy and for operations.

Analytically, evaluation can bring rigour to policy and planning. A key evaluation tool is the so-called “theory of change”. All too often, this is not well articulated in policies in programmes. Systematic evaluation can take a cool look at the assumptions underpinning development initiatives, and assess their relevance, clarity and coherence. Drivers and constraints can be identified. It is in this sense, perhaps, that evaluation can make a claim to being able to “drive economic recovery and growth” as per the title for this session.

Of course, politically, nothing succeeds like success. Evaluations results can play a role in persuading decision makers to support an initiative or invest in a country. (Gleneagles)

So, if it is so helpful, why is evaluation not driving Africa’s economic recovery and growth? At one level, it is because evidence-based policy and operations are scarce commodities in many parts of the world. The dark arts of policymaking have long been as much about cutting political deals as about rational planning. Good policy and good governance are two sides of the same coin; evaluation can only flourish in an open and rules-driven environment. Improvements in governance in Africa are creating demands for better policy – and this creates an opportunity for relevant policy research and evaluation to make a difference.

But there is a further hurdle to cross. Capacity constraints inhibit both the demand and the supply of quality evaluation. Those who ask for evaluations must know what they are asking for and how to commission it in ways that meet their needs – this is no simple matter. Equally, those undertaking evaluations need not only the technical skills, but also the social, institutional and ultimately political skills to deliver evaluations which will make a difference.

Efforts are being made here and a major new initiative looks set to establish a network of evaluation support across the region: the CLEAR initiative. It is efforts
such as this, rooted in African institutions rather than in donor agencies, which will help to make evaluation matter for Africa.

I can’t help but finish with a quotation, also cited by Zoellig in his Georgetown speech, from someone who came from my home country, the philosopher David Hume, who wrote that “A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence”. This presentation has been strong on assertion and light on evidence – but I hope that you believe it nonetheless.

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