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Participatory Management and Local Culture : Proverbs and Paradigms

Evaluation is often considered an activity required by donors but fundamentally foreign to local culture — an experience and a way of thinking that are largely alien, if not downright threatening, to program beneficiaries and staff alike.

Much has been done in recent years to develop participatory and empowering modes of program evaluation that give local staff and stakeholders an active role and a definite say in how evaluation is carried out and in how its results are interpreted. Creative ways have been found to reconcile this popular participation with reasonable rigor in results and even to increase the reliability, validity and the representative nature of findings through more substantial stakeholder input. In addition, there has been increased recognition that high caliber evaluations of program impact are necessarily built on careful day-by-day monitoring and description of actual processes by those involved, and that the meaning of quantitative results is equivocal at best until they are interpreted — sometimes contradictorily —by the different stakeholder groups concerned.

Evaluation: Outside mandate or local reflex?

All these trends give enhanced importance to local participation in and "ownership" of evaluation efforts. Yet they may leave the heart of the matter largely untouched. Are notions of accountability, performance assessment and data-based decision making outside impositions or do they bear analogies to "indigenous" concerns? And, if so, what are the relationships and how are they best tapped to make evaluation a local tool, an appropriate technology? The question is of no small significance in an era of increasing "decentralization" in administration and education, where successful approaches to genuine self-management are at a premium.

In fact, one of the unanticipated results of participatory evaluation practice in West Africa has been to bring to light local attitudes and approaches to evaluation, thus creating a basis for the development of appropriate evaluation methodology. And one of the means for that discovery has been the use of proverbs that encapsulate local attitudes and insight with regard to evaluation-related issues like accountability, performance and social responsibility.

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Proverbs: Tradition in motion

Throughout the region, proverbs provide a highly condensed, often poetic window on human experience and on local understandings of the world. The word for "proverb" itself is illustrative of the point in many cultural traditions. In the Hausa language, for example, the term is "karin magana," which literally means "folded speech." African proverbs are in fact a finely-wrought form of expression where meanings are tightly interleaved, creating associations between apparently disparate realms of experience that throw new light on events and order perception. No wonder these expressions so often require, for the uninitiated, what modern criticism would call careful "unpacking." They can be spare and evocative as a poem, and as central to establishing shared understandings of collective phenomena as any political assembly.

African proverbs are both new and old. They scarcely constitute a fixed canon of wisdom. New ones are being invented all the time and old ones are falling into disuse, a constant process of what linguists would call "lexical creativity." At the same time, they are not oracles: for every proverb, it is said, there is another asserting the opposite point of view. Proverbs are more like a language of thought. But they afford a capital means for linking current concerns with the historical experience of the group and helping to ensure continuity and coherence in the value systems and motivations that underlie new initiatives. As an Ewe saying from eastern Ghana makes clear, *Ka xoxoa nu wogbia yeyea ðo* — "A new rope is plaited at the end of the old."

Evaluation and performance

To imagine that there was no accountability for resources at the local level prior to the intervention of official development programs is like presuming that no one learned anything before formal schools were established or that agriculture was non-existent prior to the arrival of the extension agent. As a Nigérien proverb reminds us: *Kunkuru ya san makamar matarshi*: "The tortoise knows how to embrace his wife."

In short, certain things may seem incomprehensible to the outside observer, but insofar as they concern people's essential health and welfare, you can be sure that those involved worked out solutions to their at least interim satisfaction long ago.

Flash back to an evaluation of functional literacy in the Republic of Mali over two decades ago. In frustration over the difficulties of tracking a program where advertised results sometimes seemed leagues away from field-level reality, one of the members of the team dredged up a proverb from neighboring Niger that seemed to sum up the situation with trenchant good humor:

Da an ce da kare tuwo ya yi yawa a gidan biki, ya ce 'Ma gani a kas!: "When the dog was told that there was food for everyone at the wedding feast, he replied, 'We'll check that out at the ground level!'"

In truth, there can be all kinds of nourishment on the table at a feast, but unless and until it gets down to the ground the dog has no part in it. So it is with many a development program: the inflated rhetoric does not much match the benefits for local participants, and it is just this reality and disparity that evaluation should help examine.

The interesting point here is not just the pertinence of the proverb when applied to evaluation concerns, but

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equally the fact that its relevance and poignancy were so immediately understood and appreciated by people of a neighboring ethnic group. The expression became a sort of motto for the evaluation.

Accountability and efficiency

Accountability may appear to be another imported notion. But a Hausa expression of long vintage sums up perspectives familiar in most West African cultures:

In ba k'ira, me ya ci gawai?: "If nothing has been forged, then what happened to the charcoal?"

Blacksmithing is still carried on in many areas of West Africa over charcoal fires. But if that valuable resource is consumed and nothing is produced, there is real cause for concern.

Effectiveness is likewise a frequent focus. The Beti of Cameroun put the matter quite simply: *Fà è tèbé nèbài è dùgàn à àbam :* "If the machete doesn't want to cut brush, it had best sneak back to the sheath."

"Efficiency" itself is scarcely a foreign notion. Numerous local expressions highlight the problem of social processes that give poor or no results, the downside of operations where the ratio of inputs to outputs is «suboptimal,» to use the dialect of planners. One of the most colorful comes from the Wolof language of Senegal. "Ten digging, ten filling — lots of dust, no hole." A commentary is scarcely needed!

Collective decision-making

Arguably, evaluation is at its best a form of collective decision-making about the use of resources and appropriate goals for community life. Participatory evaluation makes this goal a leitmotif. And West African culture is extremely rich in wisdom and insight regarding both the necessity of cooperation in decision-making and the ways to obtain it. The Hausa language puts the case in few words:

Shawara d'awkar d'aki. "Making a decision is [like] putting the roof on a hut." In short, everyone must bend down and lift together!

An Ewe expression puts another critical spin on the issue, and one particularly relevant to evaluation*: «Nunya avemexevie ame ðeka me len o.* "Knowledge is like the bird of the forest: one person alone can never catch it."

At the same time, proverbs frequently make it clear that differing points of view are an essential component of decision-making and that nothing is subject to one single interpretation. *Sira kelen sira tè,* the Malinké people say: "One way is no way at all."

And the Hausa language has two marvelous ways to illustrate the diplomacy and gentleness with which consensus-building must be approached: *Girma da arziki kan sa jan sa da abawa:* "It's respect and kindness that allow one to lead a bull with a tiny piece of thread."

Makiyayen kwad'i ya yi hankali da sandarshi! "The shepherd of a herd of toads must be very patient with his rod!" Toads do not move very quickly or all in the same direction, but they also are soft-skinned and vulnerable creatures — and if the one responsible for herding them gets angry and starts laying about with his staff, he is sure to crush a few.

Empiricism and causal analysis

Evidence is scarcely less important in the local cultures of West Africa than it is in the Western scientific tradition, though it may not always be marshaled in the same ways. In fact, as Levi Strauss maintained in his classic *La Science du concret*, "traditional" culture is, if anything, more tied to the "hard data" of experience than is the academic one. Local practices are typically the results of generations of observation, trial and experiment.

These reflexes are obviously important in evaluation and are expressed in a variety of proverbs and sayings throughout the region. To test, among other things, policy options and the often extravagant claims made by politicians, the Hausa people comment quite simply, *Ba a gardamar noma ga damana:.* "There's no point debating agricultural skills in the rainy [growing] season!" In short, let each one use his or her own methods to cultivate their field, and we will see soon enough what the real results are.

A popular Ewe saying stresses the importance of comparing information across contexts: "The farmer who has never ventured beyond his field says his own

methods are the best." And another Hausa insight emphasizes the contextual circumstances that must be understood to explain even the most unanticipated behavior. *Abin da ya ka'da kusu wuta, ya hi wuta zahi:* "Whatever caused the mouse to jump into the fire must be hotter than fire itself."

At the same time, the relativity of all explanations of events, and the importance of triangulating among interpretations — including those of the least well represented — are eloquently evoked in another proverb from the African continent, this one from Zimbabwe: «The stories of the hunt will be tales of glory until the day when the animals have their own historians!»

Self-governance and self-assessment

Self-assessment is arguably a key component skill in genuine self-governance, and African proverbs offer numerous related insights. A Moré saying from Burkina Faso uses a striking image to remind us that we are never independent without our own tools and resources: "The one who sleeps on a borrowed mat should realize he is sleeping on the cold, cold ground."

The Wolof put the same idea a little differently, but with no less effect: *Ku la abal i tànk, nga dem fa ko neex:* "Borrow a man's legs and you go where he wants you to go."

But to take charge of one's destiny requires competence: *Barawon kakaki ba ya da iko ya busa shi*, they say in Hausa: "The one who steals the chief's trumpet doesn't have the strength to blow it." And it requires an ability and willingness to measure and correct one's faults.

Sa kògòlen be dogo, in the Bambara language: "The hidden serpent grows large." That is, the failings and weaknesses we don't correct only get worse.

And the Hausa language adds *Ranar wanka ba a b'oyon cibiya*. "On the day of the bath, there is no point in hiding the belly button!"

A language for mobilizing local insight

The use of local proverbs in evaluation has typically served two purposes. First, it can obviously shed new light on the social dynamics that influence program operations, insofar as these distillates of local culture — many of which are quite similar and recognizable across ethnic groups — illustrate factors that impinge on individual and collective behavior.

Still more important, however, the proverbs and sayings provide a means of demonstrating that evaluation and accountability and a host of similar notions of increasing importance in movements for decentralization and local development are not unfamiliar activities but simply ramifications of concerns as old as the culture itself. And this attitude creates the basis for helping beneficiaries develop a culturally-appropriate technology of democratic self-governance and — more important still — authoring it themselves.

Gyorgy Szèll has pointed out that a common denominator credo in the participatory management movements of modern industry has been the notion that "the expert in regard to a worker's work is finally the worker him or herself." A Hausa proverb puts it a bit differently, but with much the same import: *Kome ya ke cikin aikin d'an tsako, shaho ya dade da saninsh:.* "Whatever concerns the habits of little chicks, [you can be quite sure that] the hawk started learning it long ago."

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