

Indigenous evaluation: An outsider's perspective

Daniel Ticehurst

This article was inspired by learning about Indigenous evaluation last year. What I learnt also resonated with history, in particular linking Indigenous evaluation with liberation struggles on the African continent in the 20th century. I am not an Indigenous evaluator, so my target audience is people like me. That said, I hope some of what I say resonates with those who are Indigenous evaluators. The article seeks to explain why and how Indigenous evaluation is more than a method or an approach. I understand Indigenous evaluation communities to be in a unique position as a necessarily disruptive movement, one that brings disorder to help realise a much-needed transformation or decolonisation of evaluation.

Whatever may be the conditions of a people's subjection to foreign domination, and whatever may be the influence of economic, political and social factors in practicing this domination, it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads

to the structuring and development of the liberation movement. (Amilcar Cabral, 1970, in *BlackPast*, 2009).

Introduction

This commentary was instigated when I became enthralled with Indigenous evaluation after it was introduced to me in 2022 through a conversation with Bob Picciotto. I wrote a blog on EvalForward (Ticehurst, 2022), and then had the opportunity to collaborate with John Njovu from EvalIndigenous on a webinar co-hosted by EvalForward and EvalPartners. For those who do not know, EvalIndigenous is an EvalPartners global network of Indigenous evaluators who work in Indigenous communities (EvalPartners, 2023).

I am not an Indigenous evaluator. I am a white male from the UK who works in international development. I do not identify as Caucasian. My ancestry is not from the Caucasus. My passion is learning about different cultures, first explored when I played cricket for the London Underground cricket team (as the only “white” person) in 1978, 2 years after the West Indies Fire in Babylon tour of England, and I was privileged to go on a cricket tour to the West Indies in 1979. The sport started me off. At university, much of my time was spent learning about liberation movements in Southern and Western Africa while getting to know scholars from the African National Congress and reading Basil Davidson, Amilcar Cabral, and Frantz Fanon. (I refer to these great men later.) During this time, my father took me to a talk by the late Christopher Hitchens, one of the greatest critical thinkers of our time. This, critical thinking, is a key skill for someone interested in pursuing a career in monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

My first two assignments in international development were in Africa: a year in Zimbabwe’s Mazvihwa Tribal Trust land situated in Zvishavane District; and three in Malawi’s Lower Shire Valley

that covers the country's two most southern districts, Chikwawa and Nsanje. They were instrumental for me at many levels. In Mazvihwa I spent time with the inspirational water harvester and Indigenous innovator, Zephaniah Phiri. He curated my experience and taught me many things that strengthened my interest in agriculture, particularly the dynamic interaction between human culture and biological diversity; for example, how to understand and learn you need to spend time and immerse yourself in communities. Universities do not always teach you these things unless you are an anthropologist, and courses in M&E often teach you to do the opposite—to evaluate how people change as a result of an outside intervention.

Two things stood out from my time in Mazvihwa: how soil differences were used to guide decision making beyond just cropping (e.g., soil boundaries and marriage lines); and, near the end of my stay, more personally, Zephaniah told me that to become a “consultant”, I would need at least 7 years' hands-on experience focused on M&E. My brother, a medical doctor, welcomed this advice. He had been shocked to find out that people thought of me as a consultant after only 5 years' experience when in the medical profession. Calling yourself a consultant is a hard-earned privilege that takes many more years. I took Zephaniah's advice and moved to the Lower Shire Valley where I spent 2½ years working with and learning from communities on the hills of Chididi, the Elephant Marsh, and the drylands of the valley floor. This included learning about their spirituality in the form of the M'bona rain cult whose shrine I visited for 3 days. I then moved to Uganda and some of my time was spent exploring what was called community-based M&E in the northern district of Arua.

This commentary provides an outsider's perspective on Indigenous evaluation. My target audience is people like myself, non-Indigenous evaluators, yet I hope some of what I say strikes a few chords with Indigenous evaluators. And I apologise for any unfettered or

sweeping statements you may well stumble upon. The reason for writing the article, its purpose, is my response as a non-Indigenous evaluator to the broader decolonisation of development aid, and what it means for evaluation and, frankly, people like me. I respond in four ways. I begin by explaining why I consider Indigenous evaluation to be important, especially today, and then I diagnose the problem it seeks to resolve. After I situate Indigenous evaluation within a broader decolonisation agenda, I set out some challenges that I see Indigenous evaluation facing.

Why Indigenous evaluation is important

Indigenous peoples number approximately 500 million, around 6% of the world's population, although they account for 19% of the extremely poor and their life expectancy is 20 years lower than that of non-Indigenous people. They are distinct social and cultural groups that share collective ancestral ties to the lands and natural resources where they live, occupy, or from which they have been displaced. The land and natural resources on which they depend are inextricably linked to their identities, cultures, livelihoods, as well as their physical and spiritual wellbeing (United Nations, 2007).

Indigenous peoples often subscribe to their customary leaders and organisations for representation that is distinct or separate from that of mainstream society or culture. They often lack formal recognition over their lands, territories, and natural resources, and are often last to receive public investments in basic services and infrastructure. They typically face multiple barriers to participating fully in the formal economy, limited access to justice, and participating in political processes and decision making. They conserve 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity and hold vital ancestral knowledge and expertise on how to adapt, mitigate, and reduce climate and disaster risks. Indigenous communities have been embracing complexity for

centuries (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples, 2006). Western ways of thinking, on the other hand, were heavily influenced in the 18th century by the mathematical models of Descartes, emphasised logical analysis and its mechanistic interpretation of physical nature (Picciotto, 2020).

However, a caveat. In extolling the virtues of Indigenous culture, Amílcar Cabral warned against blind acceptance of espoused cultural values and norms and the lack of a critical perspective in Africa. Rather, he advocated for understandings that embraced the diversity and complexity of the peoples of Africa.

Without any doubt, underestimation of the cultural values of African peoples, based upon racist feelings and upon the intention of perpetuating foreign exploitation of Africans, has done much harm to Africa. But in the face of the vital need for progress, the following attitudes or behaviors will be no less harmful to Africa; indiscriminate compliments; systematic exaltation of virtues without condemning faults; blind acceptance of the values of the culture, without considering what presently or potentially regressive elements it contains. (Cabral, 1970, in *BlackPast*, 2009)

Indigenous evaluation can be considered a means to an end for Indigenous peoples. Its importance lies in its efficacy: the knowledge it generates helps give voice to communities to inform decisions, at local and national levels, to improve the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous communities. Its importance also lies in its positioning and approach: ways of knowing and being; and the use of traditional knowledge as legitimate ways of generating data that capture authentic perspectives and making judgements and decisions. In such respects, Indigenous evaluation has much in common with transformative or empowerment evaluation (Cram & Mertens, 2016). I understand transformative evaluation to be one way of decolonising evaluation. Ensuring communities were adequately listened to and

not interviewed on issues that mattered to programmes was an objective sought by the pioneering work of Robert Chambers (1983) and, later, Lawrence Salmen (1987)—an objective that has more recently and usefully resurfaced.

Despite obvious differences in geography, culture, language, and governance systems, Indigenous peoples hold similar values: their identities are linked to the land on which they live; and are all committed to preserving, developing, and transmitting to future generations their ethnic identity, customs, social institutions, and legal systems (United Nations, 2007). This helps explain why Indigenous evaluation is a coherent social practice that has brought together similarly oriented evaluation practitioners from all corners of the world, a joining of hands that lies at the heart of EvalIndigenous.

The problem

In international co-operation, the Global South is often required to present proof of a well-implemented project to the donor, often serving the accountability needs of the sponsor and not the learning needs of the country or the project being evaluated (van den Berg et al., 2021). A lot may have changed in evaluation across its four waves since the 1960s (Vedung, 2010) but one thing remains constant: evaluation is a political activity (Patton, 1988). An underlying problem is that Indigenous peoples in the Global South lack voice and agency at the national level in the shaping of policies, the design of monitoring and evaluation systems, and the extent to which Indigenous perspectives are taken on board (more about this later). The consequences of many policy interventions therefore either adversely affect Indigenous peoples or simply bypass them. This is despite Indigenous peoples' access to services often only being through scattered and isolated community programmes with limited resources. Even when they deliver tangible health and education benefits, for example,

these programmes have limited scale. They also mostly respond to the symptoms of problems as they do not have the resources or political power to resolve underlying causes. If an evaluation does not endeavour to break this cycle of poor resources linked to lack of political power, then the evaluation will remain implicated in the marginalisation and vulnerability of Indigenous peoples (Chouinard & Cram, 2020).

Historically, evaluation has been closely linked to accountability, and Western concepts of evaluation are focused on ownership of data, knowledge, and intellectual property (Velez et al., 2022). Inherent in Western methodology is the power dynamic between the evaluator and the subject of the evaluation. That is, the evaluator “establishes rules about what can be known and how it can be known ... and holds the power to label, name, condemn, describe, or prescribe solutions to challenges in former colonised, Indigenous peoples, and historically oppressed groups” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 7). Evaluators have been described as holding the power to decide what questions to ask, what data to collect, and what stories to tell (McKinley, 2020). However, I maintain the authority today lies more with those who fund and commission evaluators.

The evaluation field is a microcosm and an appendage of Western hegemonic influence on international development (Masvaure & Motlanthe, 2022). Advocates of/believers in Made in Africa (MAE) still have their work ahead of them in clarifying what MAE means, and involves how it can contest, not accommodate, the narcissism of Western “icons” and ignore the pronouncements of—far too many—evaluators addicted to single narratives and rigid methodological dogmas (Picciotto, 2020). This includes randomised control trials—a throwback to Vedung’s first wave of scientific evaluation in the early 1960s—and the standards for results measurement developed and insisted upon by the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development.

The evaluation machines of today need a sceptical turn (Raimondo & Dahler-Larsen, 2022). A radical transformation is needed, I argue, for a move away from Western evaluation to Indigenous evaluation methodologies that are inclusive of historically marginalised groups. This is a pathway to solving the real problems Indigenous peoples are facing, and giving voice to the mechanisms by which they wish to achieve their aspirations (see, for example, Ponge, 2023).

Evaluation in the context of decolonisation

Who will set a knowledge-seeking agenda, whose voice will lead the process, whose knowledge will be sought and valued, what methods will be used to gather the knowledge, and what will be the ultimate use and distribution of the results of the knowledge-gathering are all important questions that have been raised by Indigenous researchers for decades. The answers to these questions are fundamentally about power over knowledge production and representation. It is important to consider these factors in the roles and responsibilities evaluators must adopt for decolonising evaluation and reconciling the past. Fanon and Gandhi saw decolonisation as a desire to revert to the true precolonial “self”; a freeing of the body and mind. Fanon’s analysis of colonisation is structuralist—he saw colonisation as a process that embeds new structures, rooted in white supremacy, into a society that will need to be replaced. He saw decolonisation as the replacing of one “species of men” with another, and there must therefore be a *tabula rasa*—a cleaning of the slate—and structure of society (Fanon, 1961).

In Africa, the very legitimacy and efficacy of the African nation-state, often governed by predatory leadership, remains problematic. Basil Davidson maintains that African leaders, in their rush to liberation and in their alienation from African culture, which they viewed as savage and primitive, agreed to construct new nation-states on European models imposed upon them by departing colonial

authorities. They uncritically accepted undemocratic and authoritarian elements in the colonial legacy (Davidson, 1992). This legacy makes the decolonisation of evaluation a very different undertaking in Africa compared to, say, Canada and New Zealand, where Indigenous populations are distinct from those of the immigrant societies in which they are embedded. A “fellow on the road” in the 1960s, Davidson, supported the African anticolonialists and reported on the African liberation wars in the Portuguese colonies, particularly in Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. His friendship with Amilcar Cabral was inspiring and helped produce important texts (for example, Cabral, 2016; Davidson, 1969, 1984). Cabral talked much of the role of Indigenous culture in national liberation movements, and how the function of knowledge was to liberate.

I understand decolonisation of evaluation is a process of restructuring power relations in the global construction of evaluation knowledge production. It is one in which Indigenous people can actively participate in the construction of what is evaluated when it is evaluated, by whom, and with what methodologies (Chilisa, 2015). Such liberation means a decolonising of evaluation models and frameworks in moving from evaluations that are framed and controlled by non-Indigenous governments to evaluations that are characterised by Indigenous control. This is a project of disorder, not mild adjustment (Cram, 2018), implemented through a process of co-creation that will only be possible if non-Indigenous and Indigenous governance bodies work together.

The capacity of Indigenous peoples to undertake their own evaluations, combined with Indigenous-controlled engagement with any non-Indigenous technical and other support required throughout the evaluation process, will help ameliorate Indigenous people’s past grievances about evaluations that were done *to* them rather than *with* them. (Cram, 2018, p. 126, emphasis in original)

Today, Indigenous evaluation needs to inspire a transformation in evaluation. The prevailing evaluation culture is now subservient to money and power, vulnerable to the demands of white privilege and donor's administrative requirements, and geared to the achievement of objectives determined by those in power, not those in need (Picciotto, 2023). Far too many evaluations today serve vested interests by those who sell their services in seeking evidence about the “results” sought by the decision makers who buy them. In this respect, the challenge is not so much about teaching transient evaluators to be more culturally aware, or even about localising evaluation, with an accompanying shift of resources and national consultants being given more responsibility in evaluations. Rather, it is about decolonising evaluation.

The challenges of decolonising evaluation

Articulating what it means

On reading about Indigenous evaluation, I, like many others I think, still do not know precisely what is meant by the phrase to decolonise evaluation practice, or how to achieve it. Or is it, like Fanon said, to envisage and present a decolonial perspective by deconstructing the inherited structures of domination (Abrahams et al., 2022)? Like Indigenous evaluation itself, decolonisation is a means to an end: a journey that starts by creating a (decolonised) space to “address unequal power relations, to problematise historical and traditional approaches and to surface the beneficial attributes of Indigenous knowledge systems and practices” (Abrahams et al., 2022, p. 1).

Surfacing Indigenous evaluators and their methods

Many Indigenous people may not be called evaluators yet do really important evaluation work in their communities (Cram, 2017). There

are also what John Njovu refers to as Black Peacock evaluators: those who have become socialised within the global evaluation system and forgotten where they have come from (also see Njovu 2020, 2021). Such people are similar to *assimilados* (colonised Africans considered sufficiently “civilised” to be assimilated into Portuguese society). This is the subject of Fanon’s 1967 book, *Black Skin, White Masks*—a historical critique of the effects of racism and dehumanisation inherent in situations of the colonial domination on the human psyche both during the struggle for independence and afterward. Surveying the landscape of Indigenous evaluators and their methodologies is the central focus of a project, funded by the Ford Foundation, being carried out by EvalIndigenous. Communicating who are Indigenous evaluators, how they work, and what opportunities they see for themselves is a critical step in the decolonisation process (see, for example, APEA, 2023). After all, it is their voices that need to be heard and acted upon by those in government administrations.

Finding space and a voice at the national level

Indigenous evaluation is intimately linked to assertions of self-determination and self-governance (Boulton, 2023; Smith, 2021). Yet it appears limited in scope, focused on community programmes and not evident in national M&E systems. There is a growing concern that evaluation in the African space continues to be practised under the same colonial power matrix that allows the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonialism (Abrahams et al., 2022). Widely used evaluation methods, theories, and approaches are largely from research institutes and universities. Take the development of national evaluation systems. This was the main feature of the World Bank’s Evaluation Capacity Development initiative in the mid-1990s. The methodology used was drawn from Australia and designed by Keith Mackay. Today, it is led by the Global Evaluation

Initiative using what it calls monitoring and evaluation systems analysis—or MESA. This is a tool that looks at capacities at different levels—the enabling environment and the institutional and individual levels. On reading the guidelines, I was not surprised to find few references to anything that bore a resemblance to Indigenous evaluation; that is, beyond half a page—out of 100—describing the role of civil society organisations illustrated by a few examples of community-based M&E as a means of providing feedback to government. When we talk of finding a voice, the Indigenous evaluation communities or their respective voluntary organisations for professional evaluation (VOPE) need to reflect deeply on how to better reflect Indigenous evaluation in such national systems, and what this looks like. Such systems need to reflect a more authentic set of features that go beyond those of a bureaucratic government system (that continues to marginalise Indigenous communities for reasons explained by Davidson, Cabral, and Fanon).

Dealing with diversity

Africa, for example, has been hindered by one of its primary assets—the scale and diversity of this extraordinary continent—and efforts to unlock opportunities have achieved only limited success. The growth of Africa and its development have not been hampered by a lack of enterprise; rather a lack of integration. Arguably, the most important flagship of Agenda 2063—the African Continental Free Trade Area—deliberately seeks to resolve this. Evaluators must not treat Indigenous people as a homogeneous group. There are many diverse Indigenous nations, languages, and cultural practices worldwide, both within countries and within local Indigenous communities. This presents a paradox when trying, in the case of MAE, to define what is meant by an Afro-centric approach to evaluation.

Securing appropriate sources of support

Bearing in mind the famous saying of the Malian philosopher Amadou Hampaté Bâ, who noted that “the hand that gives is always above the hand that receives”, it surprises me how so much of who does what about Indigenous evaluation is funded by northern institutions. Take the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA), its associated Made in Africa (MAE) initiative, and the Regional Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results in Anglophone Africa. AfrEA is mainly funded by USAID, MAE is generously funded by the Gates Foundation and the latter, hosted by Witswatersrand University in Johannesburg, received a \$4.2 million grant from the World Bank (2021). This is hardly surprising. Consider the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), for instance.

The African nationalist credentials of its original champions are impeccable. And yet the document they championed was unveiled first at a G8 summit before it was launched on the continent. The bulk of its annual estimated \$64 billion investment requirement was expected to come from outside the continent. Its basic premise was a compact between Africa, on the one hand, and the G8 and the international financial institutions, on the other. The idea was that Africa would undertake to promote democracy, protect human rights, strengthen conflict prevention and management mechanisms, and pursue orthodox macroeconomic policy. In return, the international development community will finance African development. (Ohiorhenuan, 2009, p. 151)

This exchange continues. More recently, USAID awarded a grant to develop products, approaches, and tools identified and/or developed to evaluate democracy and human rights projects in Africa. Who’s serving whose agenda? Are we seriously saying that no high net-worth Africans—for example, those who participate in the African Philanthropy Forum—would be interested in supporting the movement

to pursue what Africans determine? It appears to remain the case that conversations among Africans on what they need get crowded out by its friends—the US government, Blair, Sachs, Obama, and others—dangling special programmes that facilitate their existence. I wonder to what extent African evaluation institutions can be truly self-determining and provide critical feedback to their major and significant funders.

Conclusion

Twenty-first century examples of repression of Indigenous communities and their evaluation cannot be answered with 20th-century solutions to colonisation. It is a struggle that requires a combination of two different types of effort: a collaborative one among Indigenous evaluation communities across the world in joining hands and giving voice to the voiceless to acquire much-needed agency; and one that contests or challenges, not just pervasive Western evaluation frameworks, and methods, but national governance and policy-making systems in the knowledge that evaluation is a political process.

If you say you're a unifier, you expect and usually get applause. I'm a divider. Politics is division by definition, if there was no disagreement there would be no politics. The illusion of unity isn't worth having, and is anyways unattainable. (Hitchens, 2010)

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The Author

Daniel Ticehurst is an independent consultant and a proud member of the EvalIndigenous Network. He is a reluctant evaluator. His main interest is in supporting teams to develop thoughtful monitoring processes that help funders and managers be accountable to and learn from development aid's ultimate clients.

Email: Daniel@dticehurst.com