

The AGDEN M&E Approach: Rights Responsive Evaluation

The African Gender & Development Evaluators Network (AGDEN) has since 2006 been engaged in research, development and the practice of a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach located at the nexus (or intersection) of human rights, gender and development. It deploys a human rights framework embedded within feminist ontology, epistemology and methodology to assure that design, implementation as well as evaluation of development projects, programmes or policies are responsive to gender equality, women's empowerment and social equity.

This article explains the approach, describes how it was developed and highlights the distinction between AGDEN's 'Rights Responsive Evaluation' and similar approaches including gender-sensitive evaluations, equity focused evaluation and feminist evaluation.

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Introduction

The African Gender and Development Evaluators Network (AGDEN) was created to fill a gap and instigate transformation. AGDEN was established in 2002 by the African Evaluation Association (AfREA) and UN Women with the aim of strengthening the effectiveness and gender responsiveness of development programmes and projects to human rights. As a special interest group of AfREA, its history is closely tied to this Pan-African evaluation association. AGDEN's mandate is to "develop and promote the use of participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) based on gender and rights in Africa". A central element that guides AGDEN's vision in its research remains in the principle that, "evaluation reiterates that women and men have a role and a responsibility to ensure sustainable development" (AfREA, 2004).

Background and Context

It is incontrovertible that the last four decades have witnessed steadily growing rhetoric and concern with human and peoples' rights.

The 1970s heralded global attention to issues of women in development, which morphed into gender and development (Bunch & Frost, 2000). Representatives of 171 nation states to the UN conference on human rights adopted the **Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action** by consensus. This Declaration affirmed that 'human rights and fundamental freedoms are the birthright of all human beings; their protection and promotion is the first responsibility of governments'.

The influence of the rights discourses on development action seeded by these events and history, increased the tempo and amplified the voice for rights in development in the early years of the millennium but not in the evaluation of development. Joachim Theis of Save the Children (2003) observed that:

"A rights-based evaluation is not just a technical exercise in data collection and analysis. It is a dialogue and a democratic process to learn from each other, to strengthen accountability and to change power relations between stakeholders".

Stephen Porter (2009) reported the gap in the literature concerning the use of human rights to frame evaluations stating that, 'within the discipline of evaluation, work that embraces human rights is patchy - it is there in principle, but there is little substance to hold onto and mark out' (2009:1). By this time, AGDEN had established at least two powerful reasons for this trend; namely, unfamiliarity with how to integrate human rights practically into M&E and unwillingness or resistance to do so.

To date, attempts to mainstream human rights into development, especially M&E, have not been hugely successful. In 2005, the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) issued guidelines for integrating human rights perspectives and gender equality into evaluations. This guidance document was re-issued in 2011 and 2014 (http://www.uneval.org/document/download/UNEG_HRGender_web_final). Although the document is much improved, it is directed more to evaluation commissioners and managers than to evaluators. ➡



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► After the 1995 5th Beijing World Conference on Women, and following the Millennium Declaration of 2000, the UN system has pursued gender mainstreaming as an operational strategy for both human rights and gender equality. In 2012, UN Women as the coordinator of the UN SWAP, spearhead the assignment of common performance standards for the gender-related work of all UN entities, in order to achieve greater coherence and accountability. It is unequivocal that the 'UN has played an important role in setting the normative, policy and development agenda for human rights and gender equality in countries' (UNEG, 2011 p.2). But the speed of change has been painfully slow and the desired transformation is still largely elusive (Etta, 2018). The UN continues to spearhead gender equality and social equity through the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development with its principle of leaving no one behind¹.

Despite the rhetoric on human rights and the monumental investments in resources and effort to date, evaluations which genuinely respond to human rights, especially of programmes and projects, remain few. AGDEN has addressed this gap since its creation through research, training, publications and support of the practice of evaluation that is responsive to gender and human rights.

Rationale for the AGDEN M&E Approach

AGDEN's research found that one of the reasons for the difficulty in engendering evaluation practice within the development community and evaluation constituency, is the success of the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria (AGDEN 2012 & 2018). The OECD/DAC evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability are wildly and widely popular in programme evaluation, more than the less known standards and principles. Until very recently, the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria have been unchallenged.

AGDEN found that none of the OECD/DAC² evaluation criteria (1986, 1991, 2000) reflects key ideas or notions from the human rights and gender discourses, despite efforts to change this. Development evaluation originated from, and is still closely associated with, the evaluation of aid and, within this perspective, the criteria make complete sense (Etta, F E, 2004). They are at the service of and generally take the side of the programme developer and without a doubt, the funder. In the last decade and a half however, since the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action on Aid Effectiveness, development action has greatly broadened the scope of evaluation to include and respond to equity as well as mutual accountability in the evaluation of development. Efforts have been made to integrate gender sensitivity into the use of the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria. These have come to a head with a global engagement with their reviewing currently ongoing.

"The AGDEN M&E Approach is composed of four principles and one law. The four principles are expected to be applied principally during programme planning, design, implementation and to a lesser extent during programme evaluation while the law is to be used for programme monitoring and evaluation".

Some approaches such as gender-sensitive evaluation (UN Women), equity-focused evaluation (Segone & UNICEF) and feminist evaluation (Podems) have attempted to respond to gender-based discrimination in development and programme evaluation. However, none of these was found ►

► to be without gaps (Etta, F.E. 2012). All these efforts were offering usually quite good advice and explanations of what was missing, including what could be added, but very little concrete steps on how to 'add', 'integrate' in the commonly used evaluation plan or model. In some cases, the advice was tilted in favour of evaluation commissioners and managers (UNEG).

The AGDEN Approach (principles and law) was developed principally for evaluators by isolating and extracting key notions, concepts and ideas from the thematic areas of human rights, gender and development, refined by feminist ideals and methods, and infusing these to create the monitoring and evaluation approach. The rest of this section describes in brief how the approach was developed.

The Human Rights-Based Approach is a programming approach supported by the principles of equality, equity, empowerment, non-discrimination, transparency, responsibility and participation of human rights. It promotes justice, equality and freedom, and tackles the power issues that are at the root of poverty and exploitation by using the norms, principles and methods of human rights and social activism in development (Theis, 2003). The human rights norms found in different instruments, resolutions, interpretations as well as declarations, conventions and judicial or quasi-judicial recommendations made by the competent institutions such as national and international courts, judicial commissions, etc. are encapsulated in a simple mnemonic – the 'ENTAP Standard'. It stands for 'Equality, Equity, Non-Discrimination, Transparency, Accountability and Participation. This standard represents both the spirit and letter of human rights because it holds that, 'all human beings are equal in nature', and these principles which should apply to all are universal, inalienable, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. This standard is a critical

human rights dimension to which the AGDEN Approach responds.

The four AGDEN principles affirm that the processes in the women in development (WID), women and development (WAD) and gender and development (GAD), feminist evaluation literature as well as the human rights approach to development are all applicable and useful for gender responsive and equity-sensitive programme, project and policy development i.e. design, implementation and monitoring. The AGDEN law i.e. evaluation criteria, was developed through a process of systematic interrogation, analysis and syntheses of human rights (HR) principles and standards, the Human Rights-Based Approach to development programming, gender and development (GAD) principles as well as feminist notions. This process resulted in the identification and isolation of five key criteria namely: empowerment, participation, inclusion, non-discrimination and accountability.

The AGDEN Approach to M&E: Rights Responsive M&E

The AGDEN Approach was piloted between 2011 and 2012 and has been practiced by members and trainees since 2013. However, it is still relatively little known and it has not been widely publicised because of resource limitations. Currently, only a few evaluators have the skills and expertise to use it fully.

The AGDEN Approach, in summary, is composed of four principles and one law. The four principles are expected to be applied principally during programme planning, design, implementation, and, to a lesser extent, for evaluation. On the other hand, the law is to be used for monitoring and, to a greater extent, evaluation.

■ **Principle 1 – Programme/project preparation (conceptualisation/ risk assessments/design ►**

- ▶ etc.) include gender and power analysis of context and beneficiary populations: This implies that project or programme developers need to undertake analyses of the nature of power and relationships between men and women, boys and girls and other groups in the project location involved with or affected by the planned intervention.
- **Principle 2 – Programme/project/Monitoring Evaluation and Learning staff understand local laws that frame the program/project and the human rights they affect or influence:** National laws, policies and regulations provide the backdrop for rights and the canvas for lived experiences reflecting the degree to which human rights principles and standards are upheld. It is important for project or programme developers to have some knowledge of those rights that frame the work in which they are engaged. For instance, if a programme is in education, project staff ought to understand the major educational laws, policies or strategies in the jurisdiction of their interventions.
- **Principle 3 – Programme/project/MEL staff identify and address relevant (Programme and project related) duty bearers:** Institutional structures, arrangements, organizational policies and practices are upheld, maintained and/or changed by officials (State or non-state) charged with duties and responsibilities, which impinge on the lives and well-being of populations. Programme implementers need to know the key institutions and individuals with authority over their projects or localities. For example, if a programme is in education, project staff ought to identify and know the institutions individuals with educational responsibility in their project/intervention area.
- **Principle 4 – Programme/project/MEL staff engage, involve and ‘educate’ rights holders:** Programme or project beneficiary populations and host communities sometimes require stoking of their agency to improve clarity around their rights; to navigate the labyrinth of institutions, laws and policies that suppress, oppress or deny rights; or simply to find the voice (when necessary) to express themselves as rights holders. For example, if a programme is in education, project staff ought to identify and get to know some of the schools, teachers, parents, and students in their project/intervention area for purposes of related ‘education’.
- **Law (a) – Evaluation managers, commissioners and evaluators use AGDEN Evaluation criteria in all programme, project and policy evaluations.**
- **Law (b) – All evaluations use participatory & empowerment methods**

AGDEN Evaluation Criteria

The innovation in the AGDEN Rights Responsive M&E Approach is to be found in the law and specifically, the evaluation criteria. Their application requires that the criteria are taken in pairs and interrogated in an interrelated/relational dimension; that is, one AGDEN criterion paired with an OECD/DAC one. Systems thinking highlights and values interrelationships and different perspectives. This is what the AGDEN criteria intend and evoke as shown in Table 1. The other contribution of the AGDEN criteria is that the focus is not any longer solely on the programme, project or policy or indeed their funders, but on the beneficiaries or intervention targets, as well.

The AGDEN approach is applicable to all the stages of an evaluation; planning, design, data collection and analysis, ▶



► reporting and use. The principles are applied at the start-up phase of the evaluation, i.e. the planning and design stages, to ensure adequate voice and reach for rights holders as well as duty bearers. The criteria are applied in identifying the evaluation questions and indicators. The first part of the AGDEN Law identifies the twinned criteria and the second part suggests that evaluation methods, reporting and use need to be sensitive to issues of power, status and rights; identifying the use of methods relevant and responsive to these elements.

Table 1 shows the 4 out of 5 AGDEN criteria paired with the OECD/DAC ones. The table signifies that while assessing the OECD/DAC criterion of ‘Relevance’ of a programme or a project, for instance, the twinned AGDEN criterion ‘Empowerment’ should also be simultaneously assessed. Relevance is thus seen in the light of the degree to which the intervention being assessed has been empowering for women, or any others considered as marginalized groups, in the context of the intervention. In other words, how relevant the intervention is in changing gender relations (equality) or social equity. A project, programme etc. can be deemed relevant for gender equality to the extent that it makes rights holders

aware of and act in ways to protect or uphold their own rights if they are a discriminated group (such as certain women groups). On the other hand, if the project makes duty bearers understand, uphold, promote and protect these rights, then the project is relevant for gender equality and human rights of the disempowered. Other dimensions of relevance can be assessed but the AGDEN - a rights responsive evaluation approach - hold that this is a critical one.

The next pair of criteria, that is ‘Effectiveness’ with ‘Inclusion and Participation’, should seek to determine the effectiveness of inclusion and participation of rights holders and duty bearers in the project or programme.

The pair of ‘Efficiency’ and ‘Non-Discrimination’ draws attention to the possibility that the pursuit of efficiency could influence, or be a source of, discrimination for a certain group and thus asks if the programme or project took any steps to mitigate that potential outcome.

The pair of ‘Impact’ and ‘Accountability’ addresses the idea that impact is to be seen if and when duty bearers and rights holders routinely demonstrate accountability (responsibility) for change in the gender and social relations as a result of the project, programme or intervention. ►

Table 1: Correspondence between OECD/DAC & AGDEN Evaluation Criteria

		AGDEN Evaluation Criteria			
		Empowerment	Inclusion & Participation	Non-Discrimination	Accountability
OECD DAC Evaluation Criteria	Relevance	●			
	Effectiveness		●		
	Efficiency			●	
	Impact				●
	Sustainability	●	●	●	●

► The AGDEN Approach proposes that the criterion of sustainability be interrogated for all the criterion pairs by assessing the durability, longevity and stability of all the changes found in the other criteria.

Conclusion

AGDEN has made a significant contribution to research, development and practice of a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approach that is located at the intersection of human rights, gender and development. The proposed monitoring and evaluation approach is based on practical hands on experience. The Rights

Responsive M&E approach attempts to give practical usable tools and techniques for the broad spectrum of evaluation activities to favour the participation of beneficiary communities. Therefore, it supports transparency in data collection, through considering the rights of beneficiaries as well as programme staff. The approach allows users to identify and respond to the power relations around interventions - a major stumbling block to successful development action, gender equality, women's empowerment and social equity. AGDEN believes that the widespread use and application of the ideas in the AGDEN Rights Responsive M&E Approach will usher in an era of genuine transformation in development action.

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Endnotes

1. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld> Accessed 16/4/18
2. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/49756382.pdf> Accessed 16/4/18

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Authors' profile

Bintou Nimaga, is a Socio-environmental consultant with more than twenty years' experience in monitoring, evaluation and gender disciplines. In her professional career, she has occupied positions of responsibility in public and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Ms. Nimaga has organized and facilitated several training sessions for managers and development agents in gender approaches to development, planning monitoring and evaluation. She has led several teams and has conducted various research studies on the gender equality approach. Ms. Nimaga has also acted as an expert and specialist in various short-term projects and program evaluations in Mali her home country and internationally.



Florence E. Etta is an award-winning evaluator. She is currently CEO and Principal Consultant with GRAIDE International Consultants, a monitoring, evaluation and research enterprise devoted to supporting CSOs and NGOs, and bridging the CSO-Government divide in Africa. Florence has been vital to the growth of the Africa Gender & Development Evaluators Network (AGDEN) - one of the foremost associations committed to gender responsive and human rights sensitive evaluation. AGDEN has contributed to the knowledge and training in this specialized niche. Florence is currently the Chair of UN Women Global Evaluation Advisory Committee to which she was invited in 2015 in recognition of her work in gender responsive and human rights sensitive evaluation in Africa.

