Awuor Ponge Presentations at c2023

It was a pleasure having another opportunity to present at the Canadian Evaluation Society Conference (c2023), which took place at the Hilton Hotel, Québec City, Quebec. This was my third CES Conference and the second that has been sponsored by the EvalIndigenous Network. I have so far attended c2017 in Vancouver, British Columbia; c2019 in Halifax, Nova Scotia and now c2023 in Québec City, Quebec. I’m grateful to the EvalIndigenous Network leadership, IOCE and EvalPartners for the continued support.

My first presentation was on Monday, 19 June 2023. It was a paper on “Evaluation in a Changing World: Sharing Experience from the EvalIndigenous African Voices with the Indigenous Mijikenda of Kwale County in Kenya.” This was part of sharing the experience I had in implementing one of the EvalIndigenous activities under the Africa Voices Project.

In my presentation, I shared a clip on one of the activities when we were entering the Holy shrine in one of the Kayas in Kwale County and the learnings from the tour guide in the forest. I also explained the relevance of the Conference theme to the participants, “Evaluation in a Changing World” giving the key components or tenets of evaluation in a changing world. I mentioned four key tenets namely: Context Specificity; Innovation; Learning; and Sustainability. I then went ahead to explain how the Voices of the Indigenous Mijikenda of Kwale County in Kenya manifest Evaluation in a Changing World.

With regard to context specificity, the Mijikenda voices have been increasingly heard in discussions about social, economic, and political issues affecting their communities, including environmental conservation, land rights, and cultural preservation.

In terms of innovation, the Mijikenda are using new technological innovations in documenting their cultural practices and languages, which are at risk of being lost as their communities
become more modernised. They are also advocating for their land rights, as their traditional lands are being threatened by large-scale development projects such as mining and logging.

In terms of learning, the Mijikenda have been actively involved in evaluating the impact of development projects on their community and advocating for their traditional knowledge to be incorporated into these projects. They have been active in advocating for their rights as they have historically been marginalised and neglected by the government, leading to a sense of alienation and exclusion.

In terms of sustainability, especially efforts to preserve their cultural traditions and practice, it is important to note that the Mijikenda have a strong sense of community and place a high value on their cultural heritage. They have a rich cultural heritage that includes traditions, ceremonies, and rituals that have been passed down from one generation to another. They are actively involved in environmental conservation efforts in their region, as they recognise the importance of preserving their natural resources for future generations. They also have a wealth of knowledge about the environment, natural resources, and traditional medicine that has been passed down through generations.

I finally shared the key learning points from the Voices Project in relation to the Conference Theme. There is the recognition of the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into decision-making processes that affect communities. Evaluation is a powerful tool for promoting accountability, learning, and continuous improvement; as such, we need to ensure that evaluations are responsive to the voices and needs of Indigenous communities, it is important to involve them in all stages of the evaluation process, from planning to dissemination.

We should always use culturally appropriate methods for data collection and analysis and involve community members in interpreting and using the findings; and there is also the need to recognise and value Indigenous knowledge and perspectives as legitimate sources of evidence and insights that can contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex social issues.

There should be a willingness to listen to and learn from Indigenous voices, as well as a commitment to building partnerships and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. The last critical learning point was on the Mijikenda concept of time in relation to evaluation. According to the Mijikenda, time is tied to events that have been experienced either by the
individual or community. Time moves backwards, from the present, and not forwards. I, therefore made a call on the need to conduct further studies on how this concept of time and the general African philosophical conceptualisation of time relates to evaluation practice in the indigenous settings.

My second appearance was on Tuesday, 20 June 2023. It was a panel discussion on: “The Local is Indigenous: EvalIndigenous Advocacy for Indigenous Evaluation.” This panel brought together other presenters, Serge Eric Yakeu-Djiam (Co-Chair of EvalIndigenous) from Cameroun and Hector Tuy, from Guatemala representing the Indigenous Evaluators from Central and South America.

My presentation was on “The Local is Indigenous: EvalIndigenous Advocacy for Indigenous Evaluation – Sharing Perspectives from the African Indigenous Ethical Protocol for Evaluations.”

In my presentation, I highlighted what is meant by ‘the local is Indigenous’. Local communities, cultures, and ecosystems have an inherent connection to the land they inhabit and a deep understanding of how to live sustainably within it. I highlighted the importance of recognising and respecting the traditional knowledge and practices of the Indigenous peoples who have lived on that land for generations. It is important to recognise that the wisdom of Indigenous peoples and their connection to the land can provide valuable insights and solutions for addressing current environmental and social challenges. We need to prioritise the needs and perspectives of local communities and acknowledge the importance of their traditional knowledge and practices.

Indigenous refers to the original or native inhabitants of a region, who have lived there for generations and have a strong sense of cultural identity and attachment to their land. People who have lived in a particular place for a long time have a unique and valuable perspective on the natural environment and have developed knowledge and practices that are well-suited to the local conditions. By recognising and valuing the knowledge and practices of local communities, we can work towards building more sustainable and resilient systems that are better adapted to local conditions.

The Africa Indigenous Ways of Knowing and their Application to Indigenous Evaluation

Through storytelling, songs, and other forms of oral communication, knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next, preserving cultural heritage and providing insights into
traditional ways of life. Indigenous languages contain rich vocabularies that reflect the local environment and can convey complex concepts and ideas that may be difficult to express in other languages. The traditional ecological knowledge has been developed through long-term observation and experience of the natural environment, and this can include knowledge of plant and animal species, weather patterns, and land-use practices.

Another African way of knowing is through ancestral knowledge and spirituality. This includes knowledge of family history, genealogy, and traditional practices, while spirituality can involve beliefs about the interconnectedness of all living things, and the importance of respect and reciprocity in human relationships. The community-based knowledge systems emphasises the importance of collective knowledge and decision-making, which involves consensus-building processes, such as traditional councils or community meetings, which are used to make decisions that affect the community as a whole.

The local courts can be an important source of indigenous knowledge in many communities. The local courts are responsible for helping to preserve traditional legal systems through resolving disputes and enforcing community norms and values, transmit cultural values, maintain social order, and protect indigenous rights.

The African Indigenous Core Values and Beliefs
Ubuntu is a core African value that emphasises the interconnectedness of all living things. It is often translated as "I am because we are," and represents a belief in the importance of community and social relationships. Many African cultures believe in the importance of ancestors and the spiritual world. Ancestors are believed to play a role in shaping the lives of their descendants.

Respect for elders is an important value in many African cultures. Elders are often seen as wise and knowledgeable, and their opinions and advice are highly valued. Communalism is a core African value that emphasises the importance of the community over the individual. This can involve sharing resources, working together to solve problems, and valuing the collective good over personal gain.
Oral tradition is an important aspect of many African cultures. It involves the passing down of stories, songs, and other forms of oral communication from one generation to the next, preserving cultural heritage and providing insights into traditional ways of life. Many African cultures have a deep respect for the natural world and believe in the importance of living in harmony with nature. This can involve traditional ecological knowledge, sustainable land-use practices, and a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things.

Why do we have to advocate for Indigenous evaluation?

- **Recognising Indigenous Knowledge and Ways of Knowing**: Indigenous evaluation approaches recognise the unique and valuable knowledge and perspectives of Indigenous peoples, which are often overlooked or undervalued in Western evaluation frameworks.

- **Challenging Western Evaluation Frameworks**: Western evaluation frameworks have historically been used to exercise power and control over Indigenous peoples, often without their consent.

- **Addressing Power Imbalances**: Indigenous evaluation approaches can help to shift the power dynamic in evaluation processes by ensuring that Indigenous peoples are actively engaged in the process and have control over how evaluation data is collected, analyzed, and used.

- **Promoting Cultural Safety and Sensitivity**: Indigenous evaluation approaches prioritise cultural safety and sensitivity in evaluation processes, which is crucial for ensuring that Indigenous peoples feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and that their cultural practices and values are respected.

- **Fostering Community-Driven Evaluation**: Indigenous evaluation approaches prioritise community-driven evaluation processes, which involve the active participation of community members in all aspects of the evaluation process.

- **Responsiveness to Community Needs and Priorities**: This can help to ensure that evaluation processes are relevant to the community's needs and priorities, and that evaluation results are more likely to be used to inform community decision-making.
How the Indigenous African Ethical Protocol Promotes Culturally Responsive Evaluation

1. **Cultural Sensitivity**: The protocol emphasises on respect for cultural norms, values, and traditions during data collection. Be aware of potentially sensitive or taboo topics and approach them with sensitivity. Establish rapport and build trust with participants by demonstrating cultural respect and humility.

2. **Community Engagement**: It highlights the importance of involving community members, leaders, or key informants in the data collection process. We should seek their input and guidance to ensure that the methods and questions are culturally relevant and appropriate. Collaborate with local stakeholders to ensure the research aligns with community priorities and needs.

3. **Local Knowledge and Context**: It demonstrates that incorporating local knowledge, experiences, and context into the data collection and analysis process is critical, and as such, we should consider the cultural meanings and interpretations of concepts, behaviours, and practices of the local communities, and use local examples and illustrations to enhance understanding and relevance.

4. **Researcher Reflexivity**: The protocol calls upon the evaluator to reflect on their own cultural biases, assumptions, and perspectives throughout the research process. They should be able to recognise how their own cultural background may influence data collection and interpretation. Consequently, they should strive for cultural humility and openness to diverse perspectives.

5. **Ethical Considerations**: As Evaluators, we should ensure that research activities respect ethical principles and guidelines. Obtain informed consent from participants and respect their rights to privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Consider the potential risks and benefits associated with data collection and analysis, particularly in sensitive cultural contexts.
What have we done as EvalIndigenous to advocate for Indigenous Evaluations?

1. **Developing and Sharing Resources:** The EvalIndigenous Network has developed a range of resources to support the development and implementation of Indigenous evaluation approaches, including an African Ethical Protocol for Indigenous Evaluations, a database of Indigenous evaluation resources and practitioners, and a series of webinars and workshops.

2. **Building Awareness and Understanding:** The network has worked to raise awareness of Indigenous evaluation approaches and their importance in promoting equity, cultural safety, and community-driven evaluation. This includes presenting at conferences, publishing articles and blog posts, and engaging with stakeholders in the evaluation field, through Webinars, Workshops and Blogs.

3. **Supporting Capacity Building:** EvalIndigenous Network has supported capacity building efforts to build the skills and knowledge of Indigenous evaluators and allies. This includes offering training and mentorship opportunities and supporting the development of evaluation networks and communities of practice. Building a Database of Indigenous Evaluators through the Atlas Project – Africa, Asia-Pacific and Caribbeans, Latin America.

4. **Partnerships Advocating for Indigenous Evaluation:** The EvalIndigenous Network has established partnerships with international Foundations and organisations including philanthropic funding organisations advocating for indigenous evaluations. These include: Ford Foundation; Others in the pipeline are Conrad N. Hilton Foundation; Mastercard Foundation, etc.

**Conference Photo Gallery**