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Community-based development and indigenous evaluation in Africa: insights from Ghana

Evans Sakyi Boadu [a,b] and Isioma Ile [c]

[a]School of Governance, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; [b]Department of Sustainable Development and Policy, University of Environment and Sustainable Development, Somanya, Ghana; [c]School of Government, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Community-based development (CBD) evaluation is often rooted in mainstream evaluation theories and methods to the detriment of Afrocentric evaluation philosophies and practices. Afrocentric values, grounded in cultural ideals and relational patterns, are the foundation of the search for new knowledge. The notion is that indigenous evaluation values and assumptions could aid in developing alternative concepts, approaches, and practices for assessing CBD initiatives. Employing a thematic analysis approach rooted in indigenously responsive evaluation (IRE), this paper identified tangible and intangible notions such as social networks, relational stakeholders, social accountability, mutual respect, community participation, community spirit, relational feedback, and consensus building as some of the key concepts embedded in social and development activities that have the potential for effective CBD and evaluation activities. This paper outlined cultural evaluation components that Ghana and Africa at large may effectively include in contemporary evaluation frameworks to ensure the sustainability of CBD and evaluation initiatives.

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Culture; indigenous evaluation; community-based development; relational networks; Ghana

Introduction

Community-based development and indigenous participation, social accountability, reporting, monitoring, and evaluation are rooted in indigenous social network patterns (Baodu and Ile 2022). The evaluation of indigenously driven community-based development (CBD) initiatives is solely executed by indigenes either a selected few or an entire society, what Chilisa et al. (2016, 318) termed as 'relational evaluation'. There is philosophical evidence to suggest that the indigenous development and evaluation approaches were the practice in most traditional communities before the advent of contemporary development and evaluation frameworks (Boadu and Ile 2023; Chilisa and Malunga 2012). Boadu and Ile (2024) argued that community development initiatives were

CONTACT Evans Sakyi Boadu esboadu@uesd.edu.gh; eboadu@uwc.ac.za School of Governance, University of Witwatersrand, 2 St Davids Pl, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2050, South Africa

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exclusively monitored and evaluated through indigenous relational patterns, social accountability, mutual trust, and consensus building among other things within the indigenous settings. Thus, the recent quest to further incorporate indigenous evaluative knowledge into the methods, philosophies, and practice of evaluation in community-based development initiatives.

Gaotlhobogwe et al. (2018) reasoned that the involvement of indigenous people and their knowledge systems and values in community-based programmes through local practices and concepts could promote a new evaluation framework and ideas and sustained community development. The aim is not to conjure anew indigenous philosophical values, ideas, norms, and other cultural realities in most societies but rather to integrate what had existed in various cultural philosophies into the ways evaluation is done in community development programmes (Easton, 2012). Afrocentric evaluation paradigms and other culturally responsive evaluation systems continue to work well in community-based development initiatives, however, the philosophies need further interrogation (Boadu and Ile 2023; Easton 2012).

Moreover, the relational patterns and reporting systems used within the indigenous communities tend to typify the contemporary participatory evaluation approach (Boadu and Ile 2022). Nonetheless, Cram, Chilisa and Mertens (2013) asserted that there is limited indigenous knowledge and participation in the evaluations of community-based development policies. Boadu and Ile (2022) affirmed that indigenous societies and their evaluation ideas are mostly neglected in the CBD and decision-making processes. However, the relevance of cultural values in indigenous decision-making, implementation, information gathering, assessment, and evaluation frameworks is not in doubt (Boadu and Ile 2023; Cram, Chilisa and Mertens 2013; Easton 2012).

Boadu and Ile (2022) argued that there is a need to incorporate indigenous knowledge and relational stakeholders in social programmes within the indigenous communities. Besides, the indigenous relational knowledge is deeply rooted in cultural philosophies and competencies that tend to offer an avenue for varying perspectives in the conduct of inquiry within the indigenous communities (Boadu and Ile 2022; Cloete 2016; Cram, Chilisa and Mertens 2013). Moreover, the indigenous people have always participated in CBD initiatives within African societies, however, Chilisa et al. (2016) observed indigenous evaluation philosophies are mostly excluded, marginalised, and dismissed in contemporary evaluation frameworks.

Evaluation knowledge in Africa tends to be unequal and there is a power disparity that is highly skewed towards Euro-American values, theories, and practices at the detriment of Afrocentric values (Boadu and Ile 2022, 2023; Cloete and Auriacombe 2019). Moreover, what needs to be measured and what knowledge systems to use are often influenced by non-indigenous evaluators (Boadu and Ile 2022). Thus, there is a need to feature indigenous evaluation values and other cultural realities to complement the present conceptualisation of evaluation philosophies, approaches, and practices in CBD initiatives. Evaluation within the indigenous context tends to be a communal activity (Boadu and Ile 2023) and thus, requires individual and community inclusion. Indigenous communities tend to have a strong sense of collective ideals which are evident in culture (Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart 2015; Boadu and Ile 2024). Boadu and Ile (2022) argued that indigenous communities have multicultural competence which is much better than singular cultural capability when evaluating community-based development initiatives. Community-

based evaluation happens in an environment of varying cultural value systems which tends to affect the evaluation activities.

Social inclusion principles are evident within the indigenous communities in Ghana and these concepts tend to emphasise equity, and diversity of knowledge and allow for individuals, groups, and community participation (Boadu and Ile 2023). Moreover, there is interconnectedness and interdependence within the indigenous communities where the individual exits because of the community and vice versa (Chilisa and Malunga 2012; Cloete 2016). The indigenous relational evaluation approaches offer avenues for the indigenous people to participate in the evaluation activities (Chilisa, et al. 2016).

Abma and Widdershoven (2008) argued that within indigenous settings, social relations create prospects for several community-based stakeholders to actively participate in the evaluation process. Nonetheless, the indigenous relational stakeholders and their values are often ignored in community-based development initiatives (Boadu et al. 2024). Similarly, contemporary evaluation methods and theories have failed to design and implement evaluation frameworks and paradigms that incorporate indigenous ideals and cultural values (Boadu and Ile 2022, 2023; Chilisa et al. 2016; Cloete and Auriacombe 2019).

The interaction between the community stakeholders and the indigenous evaluator is essential in the community-based development evaluation process. Abma and Widdershoven (2008) stated that social relationships between stakeholders and programme evaluators tend to foster successful and efficient programme assessment. Thus, by seeking out varying perspectives and fostering a dialogue between indigenous stakeholders and the evaluators, the indigenous evaluation approach is predicated on the inclusion of numerous stakeholders, vulnerable voices, and economically or socially disadvantaged groups (Abma and Widdershoven 2008; Boadu and Ile 2022; Chilisa et al. 2016; Visse, Abma, and Widdershoven 2012).

In indigenous communities, there is a strong relationship and partnership between the tribal government and the indigenous people, which opens a pathway for individuals, small groups, and other stakeholders to actively participate in the governance and decision-making process (Bowman and Dodge-Francis 2018; Bremner and Bowman 2020; Gaotlhobogwe et al. 2018). The growing acceptance of incorporating cultural values and philosophies into modern evaluation methods, ideas, and practices among indigenous evaluators is evidence of the philosophical skewness. To ensure indigenous engagement and cooperation between researchers, tribal governance, and relational stakeholders, Boadu and Ile (2023) proposed a synergy between contemporary and indigenous evaluation values. Key research questions that guided this paper were as follows:

(a) What indigenous norms and values have supported community-based development and evaluation initiatives?
(b) What indigenous relational mechanisms have enhanced or hindered community-based development and evaluation practices?
(c) What are the approaches for merging indigenous concepts, methods, and practices into contemporary community-based development and evaluation activities?

Contextualising culturally/indigenously responsive evaluation in CBD

CRE was propounded to resolve the complexities embedded in community-based development policies and evaluation activities (Thomas and Parsons 2017). The evolution of CRE can be traced as far back as the late 1930s (Jackson 1940) and was later developed by Stake (1987) and has currently been refined by many proponents (Hood, Hopson, and Frierson 2014; Hopson 2009; Hood, 2014; Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart 2015) to ensure that indigenous community development policies are robustly evaluated. Besides, community-based development and evaluation activities are not designed in a vacuum, but rather within complex socio-cultural, political, contextual, and other geographical settings (Boadu and Ile 2023). Context-specific socio-cultural practices tend to influence community-based development evaluation activities (Acree and Chouinard 2020; Chilisa and Malunga 2012).

CRE is firmly based on the idea that evaluation of indigenously-driven development initiatives cannot be 'culture free' (Acree and Chouinard 2020; Boadu and Ile 2023; Bowman and Dodge-Francis 2018). Thus, the integration of indigenous evaluation values in the assessment of community-based development initiatives signifies an endeavour to vary the methodology, assumptions, and practices of evaluation (Baodu and Ile 2022). The evaluation of community service delivery, donor-funded projects, and community-based development programmes ought to embrace indigenously sensitive approaches to complement contemporary evaluation frameworks (Boadu and Ile 2023; Hood, Hopson and Kirkhart 2015). However, Chilisa and Malunga (2012) pointed out that there are still gaps in the field of evaluation in Africa, and Ghana is no exception when it comes to the integration of indigenous evaluative guidelines and other cultural ideas into evaluation theories, frameworks, and practices.

IRE and CRE are often used interchangeably in the evaluation literature (Boadu and Ile 2022); however, IRE approaches are assumed to be holistic in that they not only focus on peculiar philosophical perspectives but rather try to integrate socio-cultural realities of individuals and communities in the design of evaluation research (Baodu and Ile 2023; Boyce and Chouinard 2017; Hood, Hopson and Frierson, 2014). Community interrelation is of great importance to this approach (Baodu and Ile 2023; Easton 2012). Boadu et al. (2021) identified social coherence as the degree of social network integration, how these networks participate in the planning, management, and execution of community-based development projects, as well as the level of camaraderie that is directed toward social change and development sustainability.

IRE philosophies tend to foster mutually beneficial interaction between local communities and indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators, thereby empowering the local participants (individuals and communities) for social change (Brown and Lallo 2020; Easton 2012; Fetterman 2019). Indigenously driven assessment concepts in community-based development tend to promote engagement, power sharing, knowledge sharing, and community empowerment (Boadu and Ile 2023; Boadu 2022). Community empowerment also enhance communal policies sustainability (Boadu and Ile 2024). Empowerment, according to Fetterman (2019), is a prerequisite for community autonomy, social inclusion, and the assurance of a 'can do' attitude in community-based development projects that have an impact on community well-being. IRE empowers individuals and communities to co-produce, co-design, co-manage, and co-own evaluation knowledge and processes (Boadu and Ile 2022).

IRE approaches, methods, and practices are rooted in indigenous relational institutions, social networks, norms, social accountability, and other cultural realities within a specific community (Boadu and Ile 2023). IRE focuses on recognising and comprehending the range of indigenous mechanisms, governance structures, values, norms, social networks, ways of thinking, cultural expressions, and forms of relationship-based structures that are present in indigenous communities, and which influence community-based development, research, and evaluation (Boadu and Ile 2023; Chilisa et al. 2016; Easton 2012). IRE tends to be culturally flexible (Boadu and Ile 2023) and draws on other evaluation approaches that appreciate cultural philosophies such as inclusive evaluation (Mertens 1999), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman 2019), tribally driven participatory approaches (Mariella, Brown, Carter and Verri 2009), collaborative evaluation (Rodríguez-Campos 2012), participatory evaluation (Boadu and Ile 2019), deliberative evaluation (House and Howe 2003) and equity-focused evaluation (Hopson, Kirkhart, and Bledsoe 2012).

Consequence of indigenous evaluation in CBD

Integrating historical experiences, indigenous ideologies, and other socio-cultural realities into evaluation theories, techniques, and practices is how indigenous evaluators hope to decolonise contemporary evaluation (Boadu and Ile 2023; Gaotlhobogwe et al. 2018; Hood, Hopson and Frierson 2014; Samuels and Ryan 2011). However, to design evaluation guidelines that are inclined toward cultural values, the indigenous notions are frequently entangled in overlapping approaches, philosophies, and practices from other disciplines, including history, sociology, political science, anthropologies, and development studies, among others, which tend to disrupt the authenticity (Boadu and Ile 2021; Chilisa, Major, Gaotlhobogwe and Mokgolodi 2016; Hood, Hopson and Frierson 2014; Mertens and Zimmerman 2015).

Besides, there is greater interest on the part of indigenous evaluators to explore, develop, advance, and build new indigenous evaluative approaches into the contemporary practice of evaluation to ensure local empowerment (Boadu and Ile 2022; Fetterman 2019). However, there is greater uncertainty regarding what constitutes social change and empowerment in culturally responsive evaluation approaches within dominant cultural groups (Brown & Lallo 2020). Boadu and Ile (2023) argued that indigenously responsive evaluation philosophies provide vague pathways for indigenous or non-indigenous evaluators to follow when evaluating a community-based development initiative. Moreover, Brown and Lallo (2020, 1) proposed the indigenous 'talking circle' as a pathway for its ability to provide dialogue and Boadu (2022) affirmed that the framework has a flexible procedure that encourages consensus building and ensures local participation. The 'talking circle' method has the potential to be useful for conducting community-based evaluation since it empowers local participants, takes into account cultural realities, reorganises the social structure, and fosters both community spirit and reconciliation (Brown and Lallo 2020; Chilisa et al. 2016; Chilisa and Malunga 2012).

Indigenously responsive evaluation strategies are deeply rooted in a 'strength-based approach' which tends to focus on problem-solving (Thomas & Parsons 2017) rather than drawbacks associated with the intergradation of indigenous philosophies into community-based development evaluation activities (Boadu 2022). Besides strength-based

approach is the basis upon which indigenous evaluators seek to curb the cultural disparities that evaluators are challenged in their quest to develop a comprehensive evaluation guideline for community development evaluation. There is a strong optimism underpinning the strength-based evaluation paradigm, thus, utilising strength-based evaluation models will allow both the indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators to identify and understand that cultural realities within a particular community that can help in the evaluation of communal activities (Frierson, Hood and Hughes 2002).

Context-specific socio-cultural realities when tapped properly by both indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators may enhance the evaluation design and practices (Chilisa et al. 2016; Easton 2012) when assessing community development initiatives. Thomas and Parsons (2017) argued that the problem is usually the inability of evaluators to recognise, appreciate, and understand context-specific cultural philosophies in evaluation. Moreover, diversity in indigenous assessment is seen as a strength rather than a weakness, so when it is effectively harnessed, evaluation techniques, designs, reports, findings, and feedback systems in community-based development programme evaluation could be expanded, enhanced, and maximised (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, and Caruthers 2010; Boadu 2022). Communities or individual's participation in community-driven development programmes is essential for sustainable development (Boadu 2022). The 'talking circle', according to Brown and Lallo (2020), allows for the assimilation of cultural norms and value systems and contributes to the development of some level of interconnection among community members.

CRE as an approach does not acclaim a total uniqueness in the evaluation of community-based development projects, however, it agrees with other approaches that are rooted in citizen empowerment, social accountability, community cohesion, social inclusion, power relations, and social justice (Boaud et al 2021; Fetterman 2019; Greene 2005). Thomas and Parsons (2017) argued that the evaluation philosophy is either directly (such as inclusive evaluation, deliberative democratic evaluation, equity-focused evaluation, and empowerment evaluation) or indirectly (such as participatory evaluation) rooted in the social justice perspectives. Evaluation approaches embedded in cultural ideals are firmly anchored on interdisciplinary information acquisition base mechanisms (Thomas, and Parsons 2017). Active indigenous community participation is the underlying tenet of the evaluation framework (Boadu and Ile 2022). The evaluation approach provides marginalised stakeholders within the indigenous communities with little to no voice, and the power to influence and shape the community development decision-making and evaluation activities (Boadu et al. 2021; Brown and Lallo 2020; Chilisa et al. 2016).

Empirical review

The integration of indigenous knowledge and other cultural realities is becoming a core concept in evaluation and community-based development policies (Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart 2015). Although there is more acceptance of cultural evaluation methodologies in Africa (Chilisa 2015), there is still a gap in the framework, design, and implementation of evaluations in community development strategies. There has been very little consideration of indigenous values and other cultural settings in the design and implementation of evaluation in African (Chilisa and Malunga 2012), a situation which has also been

affirmed by Boadu (2022) in a study conducted in Ghana. However, the relevance and integration of indigenous evaluative knowledge and cultural ideals have been promoted by African proponents of indigenous evaluation (Boadu and Ile 2022, 2023; Chilisa et al. 2016; Easton 2012; Gaotlhobogwe et al. 2018; Jeng 2012) Thomas and Parsons (2017) argued that besides the established notions regarding indigenous evaluation, the practices and approaches are still in their developing stages, especially in public policies, donor-funded projects, and community-based development initiatives. Hood, Hopson and Kirkhart (2015) asserted that the indigenous evaluation approach tends to acknowledge that socio-political, contextual dimensions and ecological settings matter fundamentally in evaluation. Indigenous notions are gaining greater recognition in the field of evaluation and community-based development programmes (Boadu 2022; Hood, Hopson and Kirkhart 2015; Hopson 2012). The recent paradigm shift is essential for the evaluation discipline as well as the evaluation of community-based development policies.

Indigenously sensitive evaluation frameworks provide a different perspective because they favour the incorporation of socio-cultural elements such as societal values, norms, proverbs, indigenous political structures, stereotypes, community expectations, and other cultural realities into the theories, methods, and practices of evaluation (Boadu and Ile 2023; Chilisa et al. 2016; Easton 2012; Jeng 2012). Moreover, there is a wave of indigenous knowledge in the contemporary practice of evaluation in community development programmes in Africa (Chilisa et al. 2016) as well as in the community development literature (Bremner and Bowman 2020; Muwanga-Zake 2009; Sillitoe and Marzano 2009; Sithole 2016).

Several evaluation paradigms that take into account cultural ideas are now emerging as a result of changes made to the conventional evaluation approach (Chilisa et al. 2016; Easton, 2012; Hood, Hopson and Kirkhart 2015; Samuels and Ryan, 2011) such as; collaborative evaluation (Haugen and Chouinard 2019; Rodríguez-Campos 2012), participatory evaluation (Cousins et al. 2012), community-based evaluation (Burian et al. 2019), feminist evaluation (Haylock & Miller, 2016), mixed-method evaluation (White, Menon and Waddington 2018), inclusive evaluation (Mertens 1999), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman 2019), performance evaluation (Marcis, Bortoluzzi, de Lima and da Costa 2019) and indigenous evaluation (Boadu and Ile 2022). The rationale, context, and legitimacy of the many types of evaluation, as well as the underlying methodology, social realities, and its necessity to enable social transformation, are all connected to the changes in evaluation approaches (Chilisa and Malunga 2012; Haylock and Miller 2016; Thomas and Parsons 2017). Moreover, the inclusion of indigenous evaluation ideals and tenets has become vital in understanding evaluation activities in community-based development programmes (Boadu 2022; Easton 2012; Gaotlhobogwe et al. 2018).

Cloete (2016) argued that conceiving an indigenous evaluation theory, practice, and approach is an attempt to perceive evaluation from a cultural and contextual specificity. There should be an attempt to curb the 'wholesale' evaluation approaches by building culturally responsive evaluation frameworks that are unique to indigenous society and their peculiar cultural realities (Boadu and Ile 2023; Chilisa et al. 2016). Thus, decolonising the evaluation approaches by incorporating cultural philosophies and context specificity will be a consequence of indigenous people's control, influence, and ownership of the evaluation activities and their outcomes (Boadu and Ile 2022; Chilisa and Malunga 2012; Shepherd and Graham 2020).

Evaluation is one of several new developments in the development literature where the emphasis on indigenous knowledge has moved from the margins to the centre of policy formulation. (Easton 2012; Hood, Hopson and Frierson 2014; Odora-Hoppers 2002; Sillitoe and Marzano 2009). The indigenisation of evaluation models and practice has gradually been embraced by African evaluators because of the numerous socio-cultural realities within which most public policies and community development programmes are implemented, managed, and accessed (Chilisa et al. 2016; Baodu 2022). Culture and context are two inseparable issues that evaluator cannot eschew in community development policies and evaluation activities (Frierson, Hood, Hughes and Thomas 2010; Gaotlhobogwe et al. 2018; Holte-McKenzie et al. 2006).

Thomas and Parsons, (2017) opined that to effectively unravel the intricacies related to evaluation activities, culturally responsive evaluation paradigms call for an epistemological shift from contemporary evaluation notions and philosophies. Boadu (2022) affirmed that to explain better some of the outcomes attained in community-based development programmes and other social intervention initiatives, the integration of indigenous knowledge into the decision-making process and evaluation activities are key. Even though indigenous evaluation approaches and practices may be more or less useful than conventional evaluation practices, combining indigenous and conventional evaluation approaches is likely to promote learning, knowledge sharing, ownership, and a better understanding of the purpose of evaluation, which includes ensuring the sustainability of community-based development (Boadu and Ile 2022).

Culturally driven evaluation strategies use a different approach because of the focus on socio-cultural issues, power disparities within each community, tribal governance systems, and local government entities (Bowman 2019). This further tends to influence the implementation of indigenous development programmes, and social policies. The conventional evaluation approach to some degree also recognises the power disparities in local communities and other development institutions (Baodu and Ile 2019), thus, the approaches could complement each other. Culturally sensitive evaluation approaches are guided by some distinct underpinning cultural notions, however, the main underlying principle is to integrate indigenous knowledge, values, ideas, perspectives, and frameworks into the philosophies, methods, and practice of evaluation (Boadu and Ile 2023; Chilisa et al. 2016; Thomas and Parsons 2017).

Design and methodology

Through a variety of data collection techniques, including key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary literature, the paper adopted a qualitative research analysis strategy (Charmaz 2017, 34). Several interviews were conducted with indigenous leaders, community development leaders, opinion leaders, and local government officials to obtain an equal perspective on indigenous evaluation methods used in community-based development initiatives in the three (3) traditional areas of Ghana that were selected. Moreover, traditional educators who are knowledgeable in indigenous values and norms were also interviewed to obtain their perspectives on the various cultural ways and practices used to evaluate community-based development projects to further analyze the indigenous evaluation notions embedded in

community development initiatives. The data were obtained through semi-structured and in-depth face-to-face interviews. For analysis and interpretation, all the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed.

The data were collected from three traditional areas embedded in three local government districts in the Eastern Region (ER) of Ghana. The data were generated through key informants and in-depth interviews with 33 community development leaders, traditional leaders, and local government representatives. The interviews were conducted in three traditional areas (Akuapim Traditional Council (ATC), Okuapeman Traditional Council (OTC), and Akye-Abuakwa Traditional Area (AATA)) in ER. Most of the study participants in the in-depth interviews were traditional opinion leaders but others also doubled as community development leaders and advocates for the utility of indigenous values and philosophies in community development and evaluation activities.

Using a triangulation approach (Turner et al. 2017), the field data and other documentary evidence pertinent to the analysis such as the Chieftaincy Act, 2008 (Act No. 759), Local Government Act, 1993 (No. 462), Ghana National Decentralization Action Plan (GNDAP) and other pertinent literature were analysed. Documentary analysis is crucial in qualitative studies (Bowen 2009). Moreover, the in-depth interviews further explored the synergy between indigenous evaluation and community-based development approaches and practices. Dialogues and consensus building within traditional societies are of great importance and the in-depth interview instrument guided the conversation. The approach offered community development leaders, local government officials, and other opinion leaders to express their perspectives on community issues about decision-making, community development initiatives, and how they are implemented and evaluated. To complement the main data collection tools, aspects of the data gathered were through direct participant observation through systematic noting and recording of the flow of events (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011), interactions, information and communication networks, feedback structures, and relational stakeholders within the indigenous communities. A purposive sampling strategy was employed (Campbell et al. 2020). The technique offered a flexible method for choosing case study sites, finding respondents, and synthesising the data.

A qualitative thematic analysis approach (Nowell, et al. 2017) grounded in Afrocentric research methods (Mkabela 2005) was adopted for this paper. Every step of this method of data processing, including familiarisation, summarising and paraphrasing, coding, categorisation, and triangulation, was thoroughly examined (Campbell et al. 2020; Turner, Cardinal and Burton 2017). The initial in-depth familiarisation and interpretation of the data generated a comprehensive and objective synopsis for further analysis. This scientific inquiry used inductive themes that were generated from the field data (Thomas 2006) to find patterns and linkages between the themes. Moreover, prior knowledge and background studies of the subject under study also assisted in explaining some of the themes that emerged. It has also been argued that thematic analysis tends to seek to understand the empirical material rather than know it (Clarke and Braun 2013). The main aim was to develop themes that help to reduce the transcripts to make meanings and describe the crux of the social phenomena studied. The University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee approved the research project (Ethics Reference Number: HS18/6/17), ensuring ethical compliance.

Findings

The study found that community involvement is crucial in community-based development initiatives and evaluation, with active participation observed in early planning stages but declining during implementation and evaluation activities.

> … Community members actively participate in local development through knowledge sharing, consensus building, community gathering, and social network structures, but not all participate in these processes.[1]

The quote emphasises meaningful community participation and engagement the development activities which, in theory, should include the entire population but are often unfeasible. As another opinion leader from the OTC pointed out:

> The indigenous relational systems allow for the active participation of individuals, youth groupings, women groupings, community development members, local authorities and leadership, and other opinion leaders.[2]

A community development leader emphasised that community-led initiatives can improve community engagement and evaluation activities, as supported in an interview extract:

> … community engagement and participation are crucial when traditional authorities and local government development agencies initiate development programs targeting the local communities.[3]

Indigenously driven development necessitates proper planning, collaboration, and information delivery channels for effective community participation and evaluation, ensuring effective communication with all indigenous stakeholders as echoed by a traditional leader

> Indigenous communities utilize community gatherings, the 'gorgon beater' talking drum, town crier, and word of mouth for communication and feedback.[4]

A traditional leader from the ATA traditional area emphasises this further:

> Although the public address system (PAS) of today improves communication, not all traditional territories can receive its frequency, hence combining the indigenous with modern is employed.[5]

Indigenous people face exclusion from information and feedback, despite integrating traditional and modern methods. Hierarchical social structures, taboos, and power dynamics make access challenging in indigenous settings.

> Traditional societies often hinder access to information, feedback, and authority for indigenous communities, particularly young people, women, and disadvantaged individuals due to cultural norms and taboos.[6]

The quotation highlights how some members of the community are left out of community development initiatives and assessment processes, either directly or indirectly. In indigenous settings, information and feedback can flow from traditional paramountcy to indigenous people, with engagements among various groupings and traditional heads. The indigenous approaches are complemented by contemporary information and feedback systems, as confirmed by a traditional leader in the interview extract below:

> Indigenous methods of town-crying and talking drums are being complemented by modern public address systems and information centers, improving information arrangement and delivery in indigenous settings.[7]

A traditional leader from the ATC area emphasised this point further:

> … feedback systems in indigenous societies involve social patterns and networks, spanning from individuals to family heads, clans, sub-divisional leaders, elder councils, and traditional authorities.[8]

The sustainability of community-driven development activities is hindered by poor communication and insufficient feedback networks, suggesting the need for a combination of indigenous and modern communication and feedback systems.

> … The integration of indigenous and contemporary systems has expedited community communication about development initiatives, but inefficiencies in information delivery and reporting can hinder community involvement in decision-making.[9]

Indigenous relational networks, despite their existence, are characterised by socio-cultural and hierarchical complexities, hindering the free flow and comprehensive representation of community concerns, as highlighted by a traditional leader.

> To ensure accurate information delivery and feedback, community gatherings and festivals are organized to directly inform the people.[10]

Social cohesion and consensus building are crucial for community-based development activities because of their potential for cohesion, dialogue, and collaboration within and among the local people and communities. The indigenous social network structures serve as good avenues for community deliberation and collective decision-making. A traditional leader highlighted the potential impact of various social networks within indigenous communities on community planning and development activities:

> Indigenous social networks are based on camaraderie, trust, respect, and unity. It involves networking with youth groups, women's groups, farmers' associations, and community cooperative clubs when planning, implementing, and developing community initiatives.[11]

The indigenous camaraderie, dialogue, mutual trust, level of social cohesion, and consensus building seem to fade out due to the complex dynamism between individualism and collectivism as revealed by a community development leader.

> … sometimes, individuals or groups may maintain a position for their members over the broader community, compromising consensus and social cohesion in community-based development decision-making.[12]

Based on the quotation above, individual or group interests tend to outweigh the interests of indigenous communities as a whole, which can be detrimental to community-based development initiatives and evaluation activities.

indigenous communities possess the power and sway to demand clarification from traditional governmental structures and authorities through social accountability. Being concerned about rebukes from the people and ancestors, traditional and community development leaders are frequently convinced or under pressure to adhere to society's moral norms and ideals which enhances community development. A traditional leader highlighted the importance of people holding their leaders accountable in indigenous society:

> … Community players, including family heads, clan heads, elders, and youth, actively contribute to community development, holding indigenous leaders accountable. Organizing frequent gatherings is for idea sharing and keeping leaders on their toes.[13]

The community development decision-making process and evaluation activities are set by the indigenous people as expressed by one of the community development leaders:

> … the social networks that flow from the individual through the family level to the paramountcy ensure that leaders at each level are accountable to their people about any development activities and other cultural events.[14]

A community development leader expressed that social accountability mechanisms are often undermined due to the hierarchical structures within the indigenous settings:

> Indigenous governance institutions and hierarchical leadership, which include revered chiefs, sub-chiefs, linguists, and clan heads, wield substantial political, social, and economic influence and have the potential to override decisions thereby undermining social accountability.[15]

This was further highlighted by a traditional leader from the ATA traditional area:

> Hierarchy is an important part of indigenous cultures, yet it produces power imbalances that hinder indigenous people from properly holding their leaders accountable and fosters a top-down structure of openness and accountability.[16]

The quote suggests a power imbalance within relational structures, potentially affecting local people's control and influence in community development decision-making and evaluation activities.

Discussion

Ghana has unique indigenous societies residing in a particular community with a peculiar history, cultural traditions, language, belief systems, community practices, political and social settings, and governance structures. Certainly, there are so many complexities surrounding each indigenous community, yet neglect of these cultural realities to establish an indigenous evaluation framework could be the start and end of most community-based development initiatives. An indigenous community-based evaluation framework should be robust enough to encompass the various culturally sensitive aspects of indigenous societies.

Ghana has incorporated Euro-American developmental concepts, including democracy, inclusive development, good governance, accountability, transparency, monitoring, and evaluation, based on its knowledge and experience. The study identified that within the indigenous contexts, community-based assessment typically involves collective activities, which tend to take a variety of relational patterns and cultural realities into account. This is consistent with Boadu and Ile's (2023) study where they argued that to espouse an indigenously driven evaluation approach within community-based development projects, context, and geographical setting should be of a key interest to both the indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators.

Within the three case studies, community-driven development and evaluation activities were primarily planned, implemented, and evaluated by indigenous people in collaboration with state-led local government units and the processes are often influenced by

some cultural factors. The result is similar to Lafrance and Nichols's (2009) study, where the authors affirmed that in designing indigenous development and evaluation activities, the indigenous or non-indigenous evaluators cannot neglect contextual realities. It was further found that indigenously driven evaluation and development activities are dynamic, and influenced by a variety of both tangible and intangible elements, as well as social mechanisms such as the traditional administrative institutions (chieftaincy), as previously observed by Boadu and Ile (2022) in their study in Ghana where relational networks are crucial community monitoring and evaluation. It was observed that development and evaluation activities within the indigenous settings have several communal stakeholders such as chiefs, youth groups, women, and farmers associations among others who tend to influence or inform the making and execution of social activities such as evaluation.

Moreover, the design of such indigenous evaluation activities can be sustainable if it is linked up with the community's socio-cultural, political, and relational framework and context (Boadu & Ile 2022, 2023). Evaluation activities without the support and proper recognition of context-specific socio-cultural factors within which the evaluation is been carried out are likely not to succeed (Boadu and Ile 2022). The study highlights the importance of establishing an indigenously responsive evaluation framework in community-based development initiatives within indigenous communities, identifying tangible elements, institutions, and stakeholders. Cultural sensitivity is the basis for indigenous evaluation activities within indigenous settings. Thus, indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators should lay greater emphasis on socio-cultural factors and other cultural realities that are dominant when designing an evaluation activity for a community-based development initiative.

While these socio-cultural philosophies are not the exclusive concepts to ensuring effective and efficient evaluation of community-based programmes, however, they are crucial from the indigenous viewpoints and practices of evaluation as observed by (Boadu and Ile 2022, 2023). The indigenous evaluation paradigm focuses on understanding social norms, relational stakeholders, and networks, recognising socio-cultural processes, and analysing contradicting assumptions. It involves knowledge of socio-cultural, socio-economic, informal social networks, and belief systems. Despite modernity, most indigenous societies continue to use traditional mechanisms of obtaining information, delivering the information, and getting feedback from the people. Evaluation activities within the indigenous communities require information sharing and feedback for informed decisions. Indigenous feedback loops and reporting structures exist at various levels, from family to various social ties (Boadu and Ile 2019, 2022, 2023; Chouinard and Cousins 2013; Matsiliza 2012; Mbava, and Dahler-Larsen 2018). The reporting and feedback systems as portrayed in Figure 1 are both vertical and horizontal. Vertical feedback systems range from family to paramountcy, while horizontal systems involve relational patterns. Annual reporting and accountability systems, often during traditional gatherings, are crucial for both indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators to gather information for effective decision-making and evaluation.

There is a growing quest among African indigenous scholars and evaluators concerning the integration of indigenous philosophies, assumptions, and related cultural realities into the methods, theories, and practices of evaluation and development in Africa (Chilisa et al. 2016; Ewane and Ajagbe 2018; Gaotlhobogwe, et al. 2018; Khumalo and Baloyi 2017),

and Ghana is no exception (Boadu 2023; Boadu et al. 2020; Boadu and Ile 2023). Several community-based development and evaluation activities were observed to be embedded in indigenous philosophies, values, norms, and other cultural realities in the case study areas as also found by Easton (2012) in a similar study in West and East Africa. The notion among the indigenes was that these indigenous development and evaluation philosophies had not been fully constructed and understood by non-indigenous evaluators and researchers. This is in line with a study where the other observed that the evaluation and development instincts embedded in indigenous knowledge lack theoretical and conceptual underpinnings despite being rooted in indigenous notions, norms, and practices (see Boadu 2023 and Baodu and Ile 2023).

Despite several years of utilising Western development and evaluation methods, theories, and practices, Africa still has various developmental impasses, thus, the quest to integrate Afrocentric development and evaluation ideas that tend to be absent in contemporary development and evaluation approaches, and practices in Ghana as observed by Chilisa et al. (2016) and Boadu, Ile and Oduro (2020). Thus, there is a need to unravel the indigenous some of the community-based development and evaluation instincts

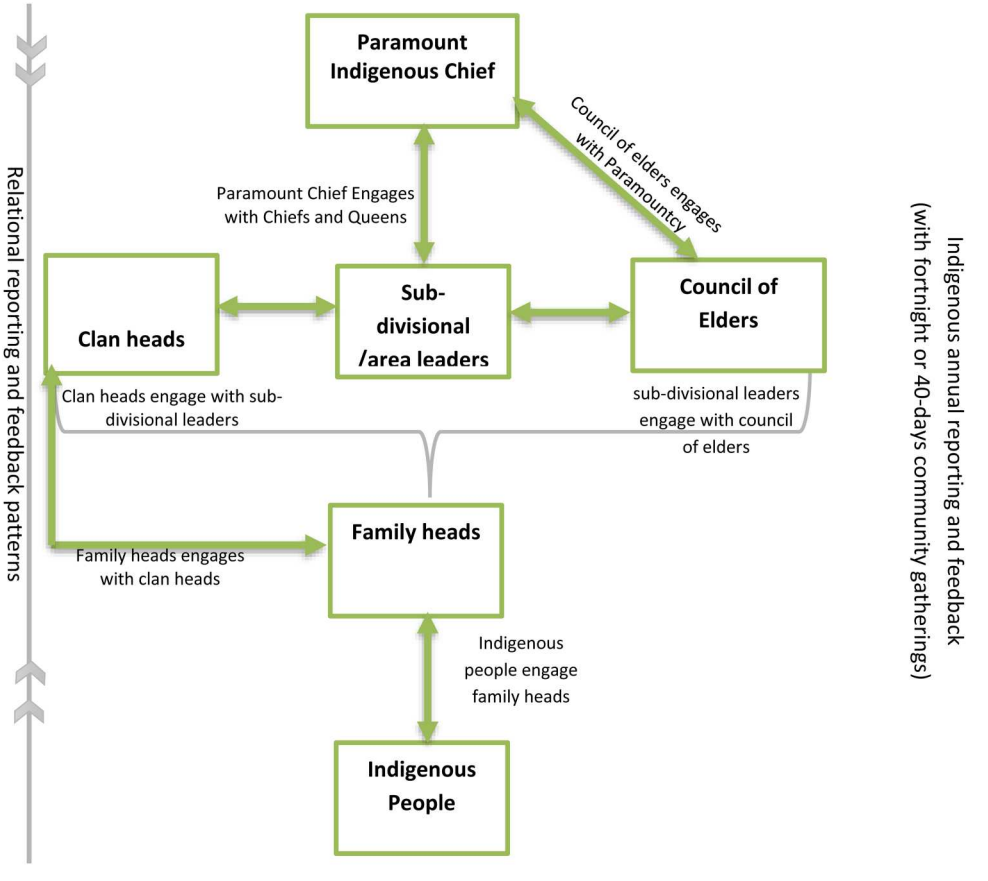

Figure 1. Indigenous reporting, community engagement, and feedback patterns. Source: Author's construct: Indigenous relational paths, engagement, reporting, and feedback framework from the field study, 2020–2021.

rooted in cultural ideas and recommend how best the notions could help strengthen mainstream development and evaluation frameworks. We have discussed several of these indigenous notions, assumptions, and relational networks that could shape community-based development and evaluation activities in Ghana and Africa at large.

As observed in this research study, social accountability and mutual trust are indigenous concepts rooted in community-based development and evaluation activities. The current approach to community-based development and evaluation activities in indigenous societies has been criticised for focusing on donor-driven accountability instead of social accountability and mutual trust, which are preferable concepts rooted in indigenous community activities (Boadu 2023; Boadu and Ile 2023; Chilisa 2017). Figure 1 outlines six layers of indigenous leaders' responsibilities, including briefing their people on community matters and socio-cultural activities. Indigenous leaders are appointed using a traditional structure and take an oath of allegiance to both living and ancestors to be accountable to their people. Within indigenous settings, spirituality is attached to accountability and trust, which tends to guarantee transparency and responsibility among leaders and their communities, regardless of power differences. The finding is consistent with a study conducted in Ghana where King et al. (2013) found that there is strong social accountability within the local government settings. Mutual trust, openness, and responsibility backed by spirituality are ingrained in these indigenous societies, serving as a check on traditional leadership. However, power disparities and societal hierarchies rooted in traditional practices and other administrative structures negatively affect transparency and social accountability. Social accountability and responsibility are enshrined in norms, ancestral beliefs, taboos, and other socio-cultural prohibitions, and failure to adhere to them by the indigenous leaders often leads to enstoolment or enskinment. Nonetheless, the relational participatory structures tend to reduce power differences between indigenous people and leaders, thus, promoting greater neighbourhood involvement and reducing the authority of upper-level indigenous stakeholders; the paramount chief, sub-divisional chiefs/queens, and council of elders.

Indigenous people contribute to community development decision-making, track community plans, and monitor service delivery through indigenous consultative social networks and talking circles. Through the horizontal or vertical indigenous patterns as illustrated in Figure 1, the indigenous people are allowed to actively participate in community-based development activities, track the distribution of resources, implement community plans and activities, and monitor other communal services. These processes are based on indigenous collaborative relations within and among the six layers (see Figure 1). The finding is consistent with Boadu's (2022) study in Ghana, where the author observed that the 'talking circle' mechanism found within indigenous society tends to improve local decision-making, collaboration, mutual trust, and knowledge sharing.

Relational stakeholders, neighbourhood networks, and other social groupings within the three indigenous communities were vital for effective community-based development initiatives and indigenously driven social evaluation. These stakeholders include but are not limited to chiefs, sub-divisional chiefs, community development leaders, opinion leaders, youth groups, clan heads, women groups, farmers associations, and cooperative community members. These relational stakeholders are key players in indigenous settings and their active participation and engagement are crucial for the

effective and efficient design of community-based development and evaluation activities as also observed by (Boadu et al. 2020). Within the indigenous settings, traditional leaders, opinion leaders, and ordinary people relay information either horizontally or vertically within the neighbourhood networks and assess development activities at every stage of the process as indicated in Figure 1. The individuals can initiate community-based development and other evaluation activities through family gatherings and traditional durbars and festivals.

Despite their importance, the indigenous relational stakeholders tend to lengthen community dialogue and delay community-based development decision-making and other evaluation activities due to the several layers of consensus building. Yet, indigenous relational structures tend to encourage collaboration, and community spirit and build social networks, which are key in planning indigenous evaluation and community-based development activities (Chilisa et al. 2016). These networks hold indigenous knowledge and innovations that are not accessible to non-indigenous evaluators and development practitioners, thus, the need for partnership between indigenous and non-indigenous evaluators and contemporary development experts. Notwithstanding the existence of state-led local government authorities, indigenous stakeholders possess immense power to influence the design and implementation of community-driven evaluation and development activities, thus, the need for greater consensus within and among the neighbourhood networks and local government units. The multiple layers within the relational system necessitate consensus among different groupings, however, it has the potential to hinder the smooth flow of information and feedback in community-based and evaluation activities as illustrated in Figure 1.

Within the indigenous settings, all community-based development initiatives are under the guardianship of indigenous people and the traditional authorities. Regarding development and evaluation, they are the native planning authorities tasked with governance, planning, implementation, and evaluation duties. Indigenous people are indeed involved in the start-up of local development initiatives, and it has been suggested that the sustainability of the projects is directly impacted by the evaluation of these projects (Boadu, et al. 2020; Gaotlhobogwe, et al. 2018). Indigenous people and authorities play a crucial role in community-based development activities within traditional jurisdictions. However, they often face challenges in involving them in development and evaluation activities due to indigenous customs and other traditions. Traditional council meetings and gatherings often exclude some indigenous groupings such as children, young people, and women, resulting in the exclusion of them from community-based development decision-making, and evaluation activities. Indigenous relational or social network structures encourage active engagement from various stakeholders, but traditional leaders express dislike for governance structures that disregard their participation. To address this issue, it is recommended to establish indigenous youth forums and gender-based community meetings where these stakeholders can channel their concerns to appropriate community leaders.

Community cohesion and consensus building were identified as some of the key notions of indigenously-based development decision-making and evaluation activities. Social cohesion and consensus building serve as the foundation for the development, planning, and evaluation of community-based initiatives in the three indigenous settings used in this analysis. It was revealed that within the indigenous contexts, consensus

formation and cumulative social cohesiveness are important concepts for evaluation and community development. Collaborative efforts, community gatherings, festivities, and local durbars are necessary for cooperation and consensus development. Talking circles were revealed to be essential elements of community-based development and evaluation processes due to their indigenous focus and promotion of relational reporting and feedback. Similar observations were made by other scholars (see Boadu 2023; Brown and Lallo 2020; Mbava, and Dahler-Larsen, 2018). Context-specific development and evaluation systems must be established and maintained using these indigenous assumptions. Building consensus, fostering community, and implementing other Ubuntu principles are crucial to creating evaluation and development systems that are responsive to indigenous culture. In the process of designing community-based development and evaluation initiatives, informal collaborative governance mechanisms and dialogues are required.

Feedback loops are crucial in evaluation activities for community-based development, identifying key areas for improvement and ensuring the sustainability of community-owned initiatives. Indigenous feedback systems, rooted in relational networks are essential for developing community-driven evaluation and development activities. Nonetheless, the study observed that within the relational systems, as indicated in Figure 1, there can be some pitfalls due to the multiple layers of communal reporting and engagement among the various indigenous stakeholders. The identified social networks and feedback systems are essential for establishing, implementing, and sustaining indigenously driven evaluation and participatory development activities. Besides, community-based development and evaluation activities require information sharing and feedback from the various indigenous stakeholders as indicated in Figure 1 to make informed decisions as observed by Mbava and Dahler-Larsen, (2018) and Boadu and Ile (2022). The framework illustrates indigenous feedback loops and reporting structures within and among relational levels, with both vertical and horizontal reporting and social accountability systems. Annual reporting and other fortnight social accountability and reporting systems are also common, often during traditional gatherings and festivals.

Future signposts for CBD and indigenous evaluation approaches and practices

Indigenously-based development monitoring and evaluation philosophies have been recognised in the literature to have good measurement pointers for CBD activities (see Boadu et al. 2020; Chilisa et al. 2016). Nonetheless, the notions, approaches, and practices have eluded contemporary development practitioners and evaluators. Thus, we recommend these signposts for both indigenous and non-indigenous development and evaluation experts.

- *Recognising indigenous development and evaluation philosophies*: Several communal practices, based on dialogues, consensus building, cohesion, social networks, co-ownership, knowledge sharing, and collective decision-making, have significant potential for indigenously-based development and evaluation activities, thus, incorporating them into community-based development and evaluation activities and practices could enhance CBD sustainability.
- *Establishing indigenous stakeholder platforms*: Indigenous stakeholder forums should be established using indigenous chieftaincy institutions to promote active community

participation and reduce the disjointed functioning of local actors in community development and evaluation activities.

- *Utilise the existing indigenous social networking and other relational structures*: The indigenous social networking patterns increase sharing, knowing, and learning but their use in community-based development and evaluation activities is vague. Thus, the existing local government social policies and evaluation activities in Ghana should fill the gap by incorporating indigenous development epitomes and evaluative philosophies. The integration of indigenous people as well as their cultural values in the current decentralisation framework could probably enable the indigenous people and their communities to perceive any development activities as their own, thus ensuring indigenous ownership in the evaluation activities. We anticipate that this could also ensure that the various indigenously-driven initiatives are sustained.

Conclusion

Community-based development programmes are rampant in most indigenous communities and the case study areas were no exception. Thus, the essence of this study was to examine the indigenous evaluative impulses embedded in indigenous philosophies that could complement contemporary evaluation models to ensure that community-based development programmes are evaluated efficiently. The indigenous relational stakeholders and other social network groupings as identified play crucial roles in the creation of the stakeholder platforms, social accountability, information gathering, and feedback which are key mechanisms for developing an indigenous evaluation system. Besides, the three indigenous communities used as case studies have rich indigenous values such as community spirit, collectiveness, consensus building, social accountability, co-ownership, self-organisation, and other cultural ideals and relational patterns which are key in developing an indigenously-driven evaluation framework for effective assessment of community-based social policies. Moreover, these indigenous evaluative ontologies and axiologies have influenced the evaluation activities within the indigenous context. Consequently, we recommended the integration of these indigenous philosophies into contemporary evaluation activities. Besides, indigenous evaluation approaches do not happen in a vacuum but are engulfed in community-based evaluation, conformist monitoring, and evaluation, participatory evaluation as well as other cultural evaluation approaches. IRE occurs within a multifaceted indigenous context such sociocultural, political, and geographical milieu, thus, the assumptions and practices need to be well-grounded, adaptive in their methodologies, and flexible in their values and approaches. This demands both insiders (indigenous evaluators) and outsiders (nonindigenous evaluators) to create a synergy between indigenous and contemporary evaluation philosophies, assumptions, and practices. Non-indigenous evaluators must respect and appreciate the indigenous evaluative understandings since the view that indigenous people have limited evaluation knowledge and pragmatic values has been debunked by several research. Evaluation knowledge within the indigenous settings is rooted in power differentials. The three indigenous societies are within local administration enclaves and are required to abide by existing decentralised arrangements which also call for the shared ground to co-exist. Collaborative governance approaches tend to

curb the power dynamics between the indigenous people and their knowledge systems and mainstream local government structures in the design of community-based development projects and evaluation activities. Moreover, active indigenous people's participation in the life of their community is a fundamental human right and indigenous people should not be left out. Indigenous people have the power to influence, control, and evaluate resources meant for the development of their communities. Thus, indigenously-based development activities should be designed and evaluated in part using indigenous philosophies and assumptions to ensure programme sustainability.

Notes

1. Interview with a community development leader from AATA area.
2. Interview with a traditional development leader from the OTC area.
3. Interview with a community development leader from AATA area.
4. Interview with a traditional leader from OTC area.
5. Interview with a development committee leader from ATC area.
6. Interview with a development committee leader from ATC area.
7. Interview with a community development leader from AATA area.
8. Interview with a development committee leader from ATC area.
9. Interview with a development committee leader from ATC area.
10. Interview with a traditional development leader from the OTC area.
11. Interview with a traditional development leader from the OTC area.
12. Interview with a community development leader from AATA area.
13. Interview with a development committee leader from ATC area.
14. Interview with a community development leader from AATA area.
15. Interview with a development committee leader from ATC area.
16. Interview with a development committee leader from ATAA area.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Dr. Boadu holds a BA (Hons) in Political Science with Geography and Resource Development from the University of Ghana (UG), Accra, Ghana, and a master's and PhD in Public Administration from the School of Government, University of the Western Cape (UWC), Cape Town, South Africa. He has worked as a research assistant and postdoctoral research fellow for reputable research institutions in Ghana and South Africa including the University of Environment and Sustainable Development, Somanya, Ghana, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana, School of Governance, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa and School of Public Health, UWC, Cape Town, South Africa. His research interests include culturally responsive evaluation (CRE), social policy, governance, monitoring, and evaluation (M&E), community-based development (CBD), youth entrepreneurship, and the nuances between traditional and contemporary administrative institutions, and other socio-economic issues in Ghana, South Africa, and Africa at large.

Professor Isioma Ile is a professor at the School of Government, University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa. She holds a BEd in Education and Political Science (honours) from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Prof. Ile holds a joint master's degree in Public Administration (MPA) from the University of the North and the University of Pretoria (UP) and a PhD in Public Administration from UP, South Africa. She has a broad range of research projects/interest areas, which include but are not limited to public sector planning, project planning, and monitoring and evaluation.

ORCID iDs

Evans Sakyi Boadu http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3705-9386
Isioma Ile http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7460-2026

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