Growing levels of interest among African leaders in establishing national evaluation systems signal a positive move in transitioning away from a historically donor-driven agenda towards a country-owned one. While this movement generally remains concentrated within the executive branch of government, there is great opportunity to twin the construction of national evaluation systems with the deepening of democracy by enlarging the number of stakeholders who take part in this nation-building exercise. The skills needed to grow capacity within bureaucracies and legislatures to manage and/or implement high quality evaluations require a collaborative approach in building competency frameworks that create a pathway for career development and upskilling in this burgeoning discipline.
This piece outlines four trends in the supply and demand of evaluation in Africa. The first part focuses on shifts in growing country ownership in the use of evaluation from the Executive and the growing demand and use of evaluation by parliamentarians. The second section captures key debates amongst the producers of evaluations and how the providers of Evaluation Capacity Development (ECD), namely universities, are responding to these debates through efforts to try to standardize curricula.

Trend 1: From donor-driven to country-owned national evaluation systems

Donor-driven evaluation has been the norm since the dawn of this emerging practice on the African continent. Drawing from findings of the African Evaluation Database (AFRED) report that covers supply and demand trends over ten years (2005–2015) by the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology of Stellenbosch University (CREST), analysis reveals that:

Key Messages

- The current culture of evaluation in many African countries is one where evaluations are used as tools for accountability rather than learning.
- Political cycles create instability and often slow down the momentum of institutionalizing evaluation systems.
- There is a growing desire in African countries to resolve the “professionalization debate” in order to address the challenges of “supply” and “demand”.
- There is a need for more research on what works in Evaluation Capacity Development in order to have a greater impact on strengthening the profession of evaluation.
- Evaluation Capacity Development must move beyond the dominance of training as an intervention, and adopt more integrated and transformative strategies for strengthening evaluation capacities.
Donors remain the primary source for the commissioning of evaluations (Mouton and Wildschut, 2017). Of the evaluations reviewed (N=2052), approximately 70% were carried out by a combination of donors (45%) and academic institutions (25%);

Out of these evaluations where data was available (N=1512), 67% were authored by non-African institutions (predominantly from the West);

Significantly, who commissioned the evaluation – be it government or donor – determined the types of evaluation carried out and was directly related to the type of methods used. For example, in donor-commissioned evaluations, the dominant methods used were randomised control trials and quasi-experimental designs. By contrast, government commissioned evaluations focused predominantly on mid-term reviews, implementation evaluations, functional reviews and performance audits (ibid.) in order to review progress on policies, programmes and projects. Donors, with a larger budget, have focused on the end-line in terms of the contribution of their investments in having an impact.

“Uganda, Benin and South Africa stood out as being the leaders in establishing national evaluation systems as a response to growing government-driven demand, rather than donor-driven demand, for evaluations”.

In 2017, Twende Mbele and CLEAR-AA hosted a dialogue on “lessons emerging from established (Uganda, Benin and South Africa) and emergent National Evaluation Systems (Ghana, Kenya)”. Some of the key findings from this dialogue were:

The importance of a central unit in the Presidency or Office of the Prime Minister mandated to lead evaluation systems. If there is political will, these units/agencies have the authority to deepen systems through a government-wide approach and usually have the technical capacity to drive this political will through a few designated champions.

The value of having an evaluation policy in advance of the establishment of rules and regulations in order to bring some definition of how the system will work, and how it can allow for impartiality in construction of the system.

Moving from regional to country-level trends, Porter and Goldman, reflecting on a snapshot of the state of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in Africa from their observations of a six-nation gathering in 2012, shared lessons on what was emerging in the M&E landscape at a national level. In their view, Uganda, Benin and South Africa stood out at as being the leaders in establishing national evaluation systems as a response to growing government-driven demand, rather than donor-driven demand, for evaluations. These three countries have, since 2012, taken big steps forward in deepening the institutional architecture of evaluation systems. This has included: planning which programmes or policies of national importance should be selected for evaluations; putting in place guidelines for which methods should be used according to the timing of the evaluation in a programme or policy cycle; building a centralized repertoire of evaluations in order to draw from this learning historically; and tracking improvement measures emerging from the evaluations findings.
The need for evaluations to be followed-up in terms of tracking how recommendations are implemented. This is key in ensuring a change agenda emerges from this system construction. Central agencies play a big role in making sure evaluations are successfully implemented. Nevertheless, the real change agents are at lower levels of government, such as those responsible for ensuring use of evaluations by grappling with how best to implement the recommendations.

Trend 2: Widening national evaluation systems to include legislators

In terms of widening National Evaluation Systems, CLEAR-AA has seen the role of legislators as particularly important in their oversight role over the executive, which is where the bulk of power is vested in establishing NES on the continent. Given the fragile democracies of many African countries, parliaments are themselves limited in their ability to provide sustained evaluation capacity development for their legislators. South Africa is the only country in the region that has its own M&E budget for training content providers and researchers, as these are the staff that weather the storm of political electoral cycles.

Three key insights derived from the capacity building training of South African legislators are:

1. Legislators face challenges in conducting effective oversight missions as the questions asked during these visits concentrate on the activity and output levels of results. Monitoring outcomes is not possible if parliamentarians are not given the tools, guidance or data to do this.

2. Oversight monitoring is work that often occurs outside the formal structure of oversight of existing
legislative frameworks and therefore lacks authority. Furthermore, the information gathered by individuals/researchers is often not used within formal parliamentary oversight processes. For instance, although the Constitution of a country has primacy in establishing the authority and mandate of oversight work and should be followed for the benefit of citizens, political interests primarily derived from political party dynamics and factors, such as electoral cycles, are often more influential in shaping legislators’ behaviour in their oversight function. Party structures and adherence to this political hierarchy can trump the value of good evidence in decision-making.

3. In order to bring findings from constituency work into the formal process of oversight work, the chairperson of a parliamentary committee has the influential role of having findings passed as a petition. This is where the committee would have to either validate the findings or not. In this manner, committee structures have a powerful role to play in using evidence to make recommendations to parliament and in doing so influencing decision-making at the highest levels.

**Trend 3: Deepening debates on professionalization**

The issue of the formalisation of evaluation as a profession is contested terrain. Although a number of researchers have written extensively on the subject of professionalization, consensus on the matter has not yet been reached. There are a number of challenges in establishing M&E as a profession, many of which have been elaborated by a number of authors (for example Wilcox and King, Buchanan and Kuji-Shikatani, Podems, Goldman and Jacob, and others in the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation Special Edition published in 2014). These challenges include divergent opinions on which competencies must be standardized in order to cater to all levels and types of practitioners (as not all individuals in the sector are necessarily evaluators – some are commissioners and evaluation managers for example). There also remain some who harbour concerns about how credentialing processes, based on competencies, may exclude and disadvantage some individuals, or be too strict to allow for nuances between various types of evaluations (King and Podems, 2014).

Globally, the debate has not yet been resolved around whether or not the field is ready for formal recognition as a profession (King and Podems, 2014: vii). Although credentialing systems such as those developed by the Canadian Evaluation Society in 2009 and the Japanese Evaluation Society in 2011, have moved the field closer to formal professionalization (Wilcox and King, 2014), not many others have managed to do so since. An observation from CLEAR-AA’s work in the region is that the balance seems to have shifted in favour of professionalization, or at least the creation of some kinds of standards and competencies for evaluators amongst African evaluators and those who work in evaluation on the continent. Reflecting on the 2017 conference of the American
Evaluation Association (AEA), there also appears to be growing resolve by academic institutions to provide some parameters for professionals seeking to strengthen their competencies, as well as new entrants hoping to break into the field.

Despite the contested terrain around competencies and professionalization, there is an urgency amongst governments and universities on the African continent to settle the matter. Many more universities in Africa are embarking on initiatives to establish postgraduate M&E programmes to provide for the rising demand for professional qualifications in M&E, including, or as example, the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA). GIMPA, CLEAR-AA’s West African partner centre, launched the Postgraduate Diploma in M&E in 2017, and is currently developing the curriculum for a Masters in M&E. There is also still an unabated mushrooming of opportunities for professional development in M&E, both in non-academic institutions, as well as institutions of higher learning. A cursory glance at recruitment practices also indicates that organisations and governments are requiring specialised qualifications and greater levels of experience in M&E. A recent study by the African Capacity Building Foundation reinforces the CLEAR-AA perspective that leveraging the full implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa requires building human capacity in a range of areas, including results-based management (ACBF, 2017).

CLEAR-AA, together with a few institutions from countries across the continent, is currently piloting a standardized set of competencies for M&E, and a standardized postgraduate curriculum in M&E. Some universities have indicated interest in piloting this standardised curriculum. The interest, it seems, stems from consensus that “something” needs to be done to provide quality assurance into the training and education programme of evaluators. The AEA has also taken an interest in the possibility of establishing Africa-wide evaluator competencies and a credentialing process.
**Trend 4: Moving beyond training towards more transformative and integrated evaluation capacity development strategies**

The challenge facing the demand and supply question in Africa is: what is a good evaluation and/or how good is good enough? It is important to recognize that “evaluators are made, not born” (Lavelle and Donaldson, 2010 in World Bank, 2014), and there is no evaluation deity that bestows a gift of evaluation on certain individuals. The role of capacity development is therefore critical – however, if after decades of evaluation capacity development (ECD) efforts, all indications are that the gap between supply and demand is still significantly large, what are we doing wrong?

One of the key issues may be the absence of accurately measuring what works in ECD. Morkel and Ramasobana (2017) found that there is little empirical evidence that indicates whether ECD processes, activities and outcomes are ultimately effective, as well as very little empirical evidence that helps to interpret how change happens, and how this may shape capacity development efforts. Although more research is needed in this area, there have been very limited attempts by some institutions (with quite a significant capacity building ‘footprint’ in Africa) to measure the effect of training on behavioural change, knowledge, attitudes and practices (ibid.). There is growing consensus, however, that building capacity is about more than just training – an enabling environment has a critical impact on the successful retention and application of skills and competencies.

Even if only African nationals conducted evaluations in Africa, attaining a perfect state of equilibrium between the demand and supply of evaluators, or evaluation-related professionals, is aspirational but probably not likely. There is no single, internationally standardized set of competencies for M&E to provide direction to government, academia, civil society, donors and the private sector in building capacity and strengthening institutions for M&E. Evaluators are also not the only actors in the professionalization arena, making it even more difficult to establish competencies that will cater to other types of actors, such as commissioners, policy advisors, strategic planners and researchers who are all involved in strengthening the production and utilization of evaluation evidence.

The terms “demand” and “supply” – borrowed from economics – must also be considered cautiously, as they lend themselves to the commodification of evaluation (and evaluation professionals). With the rapid growth in the demand for evaluators and related professionals, it has become highly attractive for individuals to acquire these skills through specialized training in M&E, which is a key driver of the ECD market. Many more individuals are accessing training opportunities, sometimes numerous times across various institutions, and in programmes with varying degrees of overlap.

It is rare, however, for newly trained M&E recruits to “hit the ground running”, and many years of on-the-job training is required before a certain level of proficiency is acquired. This also brings into question the kind of curriculum that is needed to develop the desired sets of skills and competencies – some courses include a workplace-based component, whilst others do not. Some are exclusively face-to-face, whilst blended learning is slowly gaining popularity. There are those who believe that a solid grounding in a professional discipline is a fundamental requirement before developing M&E competencies, while others...
One of the key challenges may be the dominance of training as an ECD strategy. It is widely recognized that training is only one aspect of capacity development initiatives, and that issues in the enabling environment play a critical role in ensuring the effectiveness of evaluation practice at country level. Unfortunately, too many “capacity development” strategies still focus exclusively on training, and are not integrated into a broader intervention that incorporates changes required at policy, institutional and structural levels. Organizations at the forefront of ECD in Africa need to take the lead in ensuring that a more integrated approach to ECD is adopted as standard practice.

Nonetheless, more research is needed on the actual effects of training programmes as the evaluation discipline gradually gains prominence, and university programmes focusing on evaluation do not appear to be on the decline (Lavelle and Donaldson, 2010 in World Bank, 2014). Although both academic and non-academic institutions have unique roles in the ECD landscape, the CLEAR-AA evaluation capacity development model now carries a more deliberate and focused attention on the role of institutions of higher learning in the evaluation eco-system, as the role of such institutions in teaching and learning provides a strong point of departure for this growing field in Africa. Regardless of who takes the lead in this area, we do not yet know enough about the impact of ECD efforts on strengthening evaluation practice and effectively meeting demand for robust evidence – as more research is needed in this area.

Conclusion

In sum, the first section of this article provided an overview of various bodies of work that point to the importance of building country ownership over the systems that drive the commissioning, production and use of evaluations. A wider involvement of stakeholders in the building of National Evaluation Systems is key to this. The second section reinforces the growing interest of the evaluation “supply side” in coherence amongst various stakeholders in the sector around issues of professionalization and standardization (for example competencies and curriculum design). It also highlights the need to move beyond training towards more integrated evaluation capacity development strategies to ensure greater impact on strengthening evaluation practice on the continent.
CLEAR-AA commissioned CREST to construct the AFRED database in order to promote greater scholarly research on evaluation on the continent. The database captures basic bibliographic and other related metadata on selected country papers, terms of reference, presentations, journal articles, conference proceedings/papers/presentations and reports with respect to evaluations for the period 2005–2015. The geographical scope currently covers 12 sub-Saharan Anglophone countries: South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia.

The workshop, convened by CLEAR-AA, included government agencies from Benin, Burundi, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda.

Twende Mbele is a country-driven learning initiative involving Uganda, Benin, South Africa, IDEV at the African Development Bank and CLEAR AA.

Endnotes

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References


Authors’ profile

Laila Smith has been the Director of the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results for Anglophone Africa (CLEAR AA) based at Wits University in Johannesburg since 2015. Prior to this, she spent 15 years working in the field of water and sanitation service delivery in Southern Africa.

Candice Morkel is a Senior Technical Specialist in M&E at CLEAR AA where she heads up the Strengthening Evaluation Practice programme. Prior to this she spent over ten years working in managing evaluations and establishing M&E systems in the North West and Eastern Cape Provincial Governments (South Africa).