A year since the globalization of the novel coronavirus, widely known as COVID-19, countries are battling to adapt to the different mutations of the virus and the concomitant changes it has brought to the world of work, schooling, and social interaction. Governments have inevitably been compelled to enact regulations to limit COVID-19 infections, and lockdowns have consequently become a norm for severely affected countries. The impact of the pandemic has been equally severe on social, economic, political, and cultural life. Unemployment rates soared as companies closed shop and retrenched their staff; health care systems, both private and public, are overwhelmed by a greater number of infected people; and different professions are forced into the 21st century digital world of work.

Ayabulela Dlakavu, Takunda J. Chirau, and Banele Masilela, Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results - Anglophone Africa
The pandemic and its shock on global health, economic, social, and cultural systems have underscored the foundational value of using evidence emanating from monitoring systems and research in health, education, and economics to respond to the multi-faceted challenges and risks presented by COVID-19. The significance of such evidence-generation systems cannot be underestimated, particularly their contribution to decision-making, shaping public opinion, and responses to the pandemic. For instance, infection data from health systems informed the enactment of lockdown regulations and easing thereof. Similarly, socio-economic data from sector performance reports, household surveys and research informed government social security programs and stimulus packages to assist individuals in distress and ailing sectors of the economy.

In the South African context, rising COVID-19 infection rates compelled the national government to invoke the Disaster Management Act of 2002, which constitutionally empowers the executive to respond efficiently to global disasters such as the novel coronavirus. To manage this declared National State of Disaster, national and provincial governments established Coronavirus Command Councils constituted by advisors from various sectors and/or clusters (health, economic, security, and education clusters), whose mandate was to monitor infection rates and socio-economic impacts thereof. The Command Councils used monitoring evidence from both the health and socio-economic sectors to recommend the easing or tightening of lockdown regulations in response to the dynamic COVID-19 pandemic, depending upon the mutating nature of the virus.

Essentially the pandemic has also highlighted the transdisciplinary nature of governance, for instance, the use of health systems monitoring data to scientifically track the trajectory of COVID-19 infection rates to inform government decisions on restricting domestic and international travel and economic activity. In contrast to functional monitoring systems, weak statistical systems and dysfunctional reporting systems have not provided reliable real-time data to allow governments to be agile, efficient, and effective in their response to the multiple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. An important fact to highlight with regard to country governments with functional monitoring systems is the need to make use of monitoring data so as to bolster the COVID and post-COVID recovery.
of peoples, education and economic systems. To further illustrate the importance of using data from functional monitoring systems, a significant number of countries (including those in the Global North such as the United States of America, Britain, and France) suffered from higher infection rates relative to others amidst various COVID waves, and this has been partly a result of their failure to enact timely lockdowns in line with rising infections. In certain instances, the failure of governments to enact travel and economic activity restrictions has led to an exponential rise in COVID-19 infections, including incidents of higher morbidity and mortality relative to those who enacted timely lockdowns to prioritize lives over economic activity and mobility.

In sum, the global health pandemic has proven the worth of many professions, with the health profession and governance (including the practice of monitoring and use of evidence to inform government responses to COVID-19) being amongst the most pressured frontline professions tasked with a responsibility of responding to the devastating effects of COVID-19. What is to be examined post the pandemic is the performance of these professions when confronted by this unprecedented 21st century pandemic of monumental, cross-sectoral consequences. Lastly, the pandemic has highlighted the eternal value of monitoring as a real-time day-to-day activity that remains an apex implementation tool without which policy and program success is in jeopardy.

Ayabulela Dlakavu is a Monitoring and Evaluation Technical Specialist at the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) located at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science and a keen analyst on public and foreign policy, international development, and international political economy.

Banele Masilela is a Researcher at the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results-Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) located at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Banele is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Johannesburg at the Department of Sociology. Her research interests are in the field of social policy, women, and children.

Taku Chirau, Ph.D., is a Senior M&E Technical Specialist at CLEAR-AA leading the Evaluation Programmatic area responsible for monitoring and evaluation capacity-building in English-speaking Africa.