CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

SAMEA 2017 conference strand:

Using evaluation evidence for decision-making

Sponsored jointly by the Africa Centre for Evidence at the University of Johannesburg (ACE) and the Centres for Learning on Evaluation and Results: Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA)

The SAMEA 2017 Conference has the overarching theme of ‘Purpose – driven monitoring and evaluation’. One of the main strands of SAMEA 2017 will be on using evaluation evidence for decision-making. The main call for abstracts is available [here](#).

Below is further information for those interested in the conference strand on the use of evaluation evidence.

**STRAND OUTCOME:** Evaluation users, decision-makers and evaluation managers, commissioners, development partners will have a better understanding of how fit for purpose monitoring and evaluation can be used for policy-making, oversight, accountability, and changes to interventions that ultimately lead to efficient and effective development.

In the context of M&E evidence in particular, the purpose of this Strand is to:

- Engage critically with the issue of evidence-use,
- Problematize the issue of evidence (e.g. what constitutes evidence and whose evidence matters) and its use,
- Propose, pilot and evaluate possible solutions to the challenges of evidence use,
- Examine evidence use in the “Made in Africa” context,
- Provide case examples from work in South Africa to support and / or evaluate the use of evidence,
- Synthesise available research on ‘what we know’ about evidence use,
• Engage around the kinds of skills and competencies required to produce good evidence and facilitate use, and
• Provide opportunities for critical debate on evidence use.

This Strand will consist of four (4) sessions, each building onto the previous session. The details of each session are provided below.

**Session 1: Setting the scene**

Conferences, when approached conventionally, often do not allow for reflection on the areas of convergence between individual presentations and papers. This is a lost opportunity to deepen the engagement between evaluators, commissioners of evaluation, planners, M&E practitioners, policy and decision makers and development professionals around key themes emerging from individual presentations. SAMEA has identified this as an area of great potential, and will therefore be approaching the 2017 Conference differently. The 2017 Conference will rely on the active participation of delegates in every session, where linkages and points of convergence will be highlighted and discussed through the open space story boards. Each session will allow participants to co-create the thematic areas of discussion, building on the work that was done in previous sessions. In this way, we hope to avoid the presentation of disparate pieces of thought-leadership, but rather promote (where possible) engagement around complexity, and the multi-faceted connecting points of evidence production and evidence use.

The purpose of this session is to define the problem statement and refine the scope of the Conference Strand. It will culminate in a “storyboard”, which will allow us to map the key issues influencing evidence use in development in Africa. It will be a facilitated session, allowing individual presentations to be collectively mapped within thematic areas.

Presentations, Panels, Round Tables, Posters and Papers are invited to explore the following:

• Engage critically with the issue of evidence-use, synthesise available research on ‘what we know’ about evidence use
  Both monitoring and evaluation efforts have increased significantly over the last 10 years with governments, donors, multi-national institutions and the development community in general now invested in this activity. The growth of the profession and the number of outputs is striking. This is however worth nothing if the evidence generated is not used to enable better-informed decisions and impact. These decisions might be by the funders of public services, by policy-makers at different levels around which direction they want to take, about the implementation of those policies through the development of infrastructure, and by the practitioners who work every day to deliver services, or indeed by the users of those services who, for example, attend clinics and send their children to school. And indeed decisions are also made about how best to monitor and evaluate these services going forwards.

• Problematize the issue of evidence (e.g. what constitutes evidence and whose evidence matters) and its use?
  Decision-makers include those working at multiple levels and in multiple roles within the public and private sectors, from senior public servants to citizens, from M&E practitioners to Treasury officials, from Accounting Officers to legislatures. When we think about decisions being informed by
evidence we are not necessarily assuming that the decisions that are made follow the findings or recommendations within that evidence to the letter. Indeed there is an acknowledgement that decisions are based on multiple pieces of information (including research) and that M&E evidence is just one factor that is taken into account – the choice of language is deliberate – that the decision is informed by the available evidence.

Proponents of evidence-informed decision-making often encourage varying breadths of evidence that they feel should be considered. In its narrowest sense these may refer to the specific recommendations within an evaluation that decision-makers need to take into account (sometimes referred to as ‘policy influence’). In its broadest sense, supporters of evidence-informed decision-making encourage consideration of what influences current decisions and how the inclusion of a broad range of available relevant evidence can be brought into play to inform those decisions going forwards. In many cases, this may also include monitoring and reporting information that is not necessarily collected as part of an evaluation. Could “unconventional” forms of evidence also be considered viable, and what would these be?

- **Examine evidence use in the “Made in Africa” context; provide case examples from work in South Africa to support and / or evaluate the use of evidence**
  The debate around a “Made in Africa” approach to evaluation has gained traction over the years, and many consider this essential to the development and maturation of evaluation practice on the African Continent. However, there is a lack of clarity and understanding around what defines a “Made in Africa” approach – terms such as cultural context, cultural responsiveness and cultural fluency have been used, while others speak of the utilisation of indigenous methods of evaluation. Presentations focusing on this topic will explore the concept of “Made in Africa” evidence and evidence use, to prompt deeper discussion around how this is to be integrated into the practice of M&E on the continent.

- **Discuss the kinds of skills and competencies required to produce good evidence**
  Not all M&E is well designed, conducted or reported. The use of evidence in decision-making therefore requires critical interrogation of the available evidence in order to ascertain how much emphasis should be given to the findings and recommendations within that evidence. There are a wide range of activities to try to support the use of evidence in decision-making. Decision-makers themselves also seek to ensure the monitoring and evaluation activities reflect their priorities and needs (are ‘fit for purpose’), and by ‘knowledge brokers’ who link the two communities of evidence-producers and evidence-users to try and increase the use of evidence in decision-making. Presentations along the lines of this topic will allow for engagement on what kinds of skills and competencies are required (both from the demand and supply side) in order to improve the use of evidence for development results.

- **Propose and discuss possible solutions to the challenges of evidence use; provide case examples from work in South Africa to support and / or evaluate the use of evidence**
  Activities to increase the use of evidence in decision-making include, but are not limited to, the establishment of institutional mechanisms in the public sector as part of National Evaluation Systems, the professionalization of M&E and building of Communities of Practice through, for example, VOPES to create a ‘critical mass’ of influence, research, policy dialogues, capacity-building
(including training, workshops, mentorships and other forms of capacity building). The latter includes support to enable a) evidence producers learn more about the decisions, decision-making processes and decision-makers that they aim to inform, to increase the relevance, appropriateness, accessibility and communication of their research and / or b) where decision-makers learn more about M&E / research methods, language and approaches to enable them to access, interpret and incorporate evidence into their work. Is awareness-raising and capacity building the solution? Or better institutional arrangements? What are some of the other solutions that may have worked elsewhere, are there innovative ways in which we could ensure better use of evidence?

**Sessions 2 and 3: Presentation of the critical debates and issues**

The purpose of these sessions is to encourage critical debate on the issues emerging from the “storyboard”, as outlined in Session 1. They will form two sessions dependent on the abstracts received. Presentations, Panels, Round Tables, Posters and Papers will be invited to explore the following:

- Why are we producing evidence if it is not used? How can we avoid ‘wastage’ in evidence production?
- What constitutes evidence? What evidence is reliable, trustworthy, valid, good-enough to inform decision-making? Can non-‘traditional’/non-‘scientific’ evidence be seen as reliable, trustworthy and credible?
- Whose evidence matters? How do power dynamics impact on what evidence is trusted, valued and used?
- How do we make evidence production and use more inclusive and participatory?
- How do we improve the “fit for purpose”? What is the relationship between evidence “demand” and “supply”- what are the challenges, and how may these be overcome? How do we ensure that we meet the demands of various users, with vastly different needs (e.g. policy making, strategic and fiscal planning, accountability and oversight?)
- Should decision-makers take on board what M&E findings recommend? In what circumstances might this be appropriate / in appropriate?
- How do decision-makers synthesise multiple sources of evidence in a structured way? How do they deal with contradictory evidence?
- What can be done to increase the use of evidence? What works? What can we learn from what has been tried in South Africa?

**Session 4: Consolidation of key emerging issues and plan of actions**

The purpose of this session is to consolidate key emerging issues and propose further areas of research and engagement as a collective.

This session will focus on proposals and solutions in response to the issues raised in previous sessions. Key emerging issues, areas of research and action for academics and practitioners that may enhance the use of evidence from monitoring and evaluation activities will be synthesised and presented.
FOR QUERIES OR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE CONFERENCE, PLEASE CONTACT
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