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Finding a Way Together

What practical steps can we take to transform evaluation practice in Africa?

Transforming Evaluation in Africa: some practical steps

by Ncamiso Khanyile
Junior Lecturer, University of Cape Town

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) took shape in Africa in the early 1990s. Since then, there has been a steady and growing demand for the practice, particularly in the African context due to the influx of donor funding for various initiatives. With democratic institutions becoming stronger in African countries, there is a greater need for accountability, which creates a strong demand for M&E. However, monitoring has been dominant over evaluation and a distinction between the two is needed to strengthen evaluation. Evaluation is the systematic process of judging to understand the expected and unexpected change to ascertain what worked and why. Evaluation is a post-mortem process that asses a project on whether it meets the desired outcomes. The practice of evaluation in Africa can transform through the use of consistent language, clarification of the different components of M&E, finding a way to quantify qualitative outcomes, and working towards a consistent standard of reporting across the board.

Since the discipline of M&E is still young in the African context and indeed in the global stage, the language used to express certain outcomes often varies regionally or based on author preferences. Unlike old disciplines such as the natural sciences that over a long period of time have converged their language such that a person reading a research paper from 1950 will find similar language as a paper in 2020, there is still a lot of variety in evaluation language. This results in ineffective communication between organizations as translation becomes an issue. An example is the term for the product of a project. One writer can call it an outcome, another an impact, and another a result. However miniscule the differences may be between the words; they have practical implications in the real world. Hence, removing language inconsistencies can improve communication between organisations, which would also help to clarify different components of evaluation.

Different projects often require different evaluation indicators that suit that project in question. However, some indicators might end up not providing any useful information about the project. Useful information is information that offers a link between desires, actions, and products of a project. Any information that does not provide this link becomes surplus. It is data for data's sake. Thus, a proper clarification of the components of evaluation that link the three stages of a project can simplify the practice and reporting evaluation. This simplification can allow for proper quantification of qualitative outcomes of a project.

Projects often have outcomes that are beyond the initial scope of the project. Some outcomes can be qualitative and there is no straightforward way to effectively capture the added benefits of the project. A project on providing sustainable proper housing to low income families can have an additional effect improving neighbourhood cleanliness. Such an effect would be hard to quantify. A standard way to code qualitative results of projects would simplify evaluation process. To achieve all this, there needs to be a standardization of the science of evaluation.

Established institutions such as accounting have International Accounting Standards Board (IASB), which sets the generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP), which are implemented in many countries. These rules ensure that an accountant from one country can understand without ambiguity a report from another country. Similarly, evaluation requires a body that will issue standards of evaluation practice in Africa. This body can constitute of academics, government officials, and organizations that participate in evaluation. The principles adopted by the organisation become standard and simplify evaluation.

Evaluation will grow in Africa as emerging economies will demand more transparency from their public officials. It is imperative that this practice is transformed.

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