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Strengthening Regional Evaluation Capacity-Building through Local Partnerships

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Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results
ANGLOPHONE AFRICA

CLEAR-AA LEARNING NOTE

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STRENGTHENING REGIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY-BUILDING THROUGH LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

EMERGING ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CLEAR-AA'S 2018 REGIONAL STRATEGY WORKSHOPS

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Introducing CLEAR-AA learning notes

Africa is seeing increasing interest and investment in evaluation as a way to improve governance, accountability and the quality of development policies and programmes. For the past six years, CLEAR-AA has been one of the leading organisations working to build evaluation capacity and strengthen evaluation systems in Africa. We have worked across Ghana, Zambia, Ethiopia, Benin, Uganda and South Africa, driving oversight of parliamentary capacity development and strengthening national evaluation systems. In South Africa alone, CLEAR-AA has carried out two Evaluation Training Authority evaluations and provides ongoing technical assistance in the education and transport sectors. During this time, CLEAR-AA has also developed a flagship training programme, the Development Evaluation Training Programme in Africa and has produced publications, including books, policy briefs and learning notes.

CLEAR-AA learning notes draw on our programmatic work to share lessons for effective evaluation capacity-building and system strengthening. They contribute to scholarship and practice in the evaluation community, and allow us to consolidate and deepen our own work going forward.

LEARNING FROM CLEAR-AA'S REGIONAL STRATEGY PROCESS

CLEAR-AA's regional strategy, completed at the end of 2018, details how CLEAR-AA will work with partners in Anglophone Africa to strengthen evaluation in the region. It also explores ways to strengthen the use of evaluative evidence in policy and programme planning to improve the quality of social policies. As part of the process for developing the strategy, CLEAR-AA held two workshops, in South Africa and Uganda, with representatives of invited organisations from countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia. We wanted to test out our thinking with evaluation practitioners, policymakers and others who are working to develop evaluation capacity. The workshops helped CLEAR-AA to identify partner organisations that share our values and objectives. We also explored appropriate implementation approaches for our strategy, including identifying barriers and enablers. With this learning note, CLEAR-AA shares what we discussed and discovered about what is likely to strengthen regional capacity-building work and what makes it difficult. Much of what came up in the workshops is supported in the literature, and we include some key readings for readers who would like to explore the issues further.

3 EMERGING ISSUES EVALUATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

1. The value of evaluation needs to be demonstrated.
2. In sub-Saharan Africa, evaluation is still emerging as a discipline.
3. The perception, practice and use of evaluation is heavily influenced by broader socio-political issues.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

To strengthen regional evaluation capacity-building, regional evaluators and ECD institutions must work with local partners in equal partnerships that allow for reciprocal flows of learning and sharing.

EMERGING ISSUE 1: THE VALUE OF EVALUATION NEEDS TO BE DEMONSTRATED

Increasing investment in evaluation can provide rigorous, reliable material, compliant with the standards of scientific enquiry, for policy dialogue and decision-making. Evaluation offers policymakers a relatively objective perspective (because of measures taken to control for bias) on why programmes work or not. But the value of evaluating public policies and programmes – or the consequences of ***not*** evaluating them – is commonly not apparent to African governments or communities, so there is little incentive to invest in evaluation.

Why is evaluation as a practice not owned and used for programme adjustments and context-specific learning?

Historically, evaluations in Africa were for external donors to account for how funding had been used – and also to decide whether funding would be extended or not. Making improvements to a programme has not always been prioritised as the purpose of an evaluation.

Also, evaluation is conflated with auditing. Implementers understand evaluators to be auditing the extent to which programme implementation is in line with programme purpose, with the explicit intention of determining whether the programme should continue to be funded or not.

Evaluation is seen as a practice for proving to funders and government the worth of a programme, and this can be closely tied to the livelihoods of the programme's implementers. There are cases where evaluation findings have been used punitively in human resources management via individual performance reviews. This raises real anxieties around being evaluated.

Read more about the practice and perception of evaluation in Africa in 'Patterns and influences in the supply and demand of evaluation and monitoring in Uganda's public sector over the past two decades' by DR Smith and 'Evaluation capacity development in Africa: Current landscape of international partners' initiatives, lessons learned and the way forward' by M Tarsilla.

CLEAR-AA RECOMMENDS

3 ways to demonstrate the value of evaluation

1. Include stakeholders
2. Train programme implementers
3. Host study tours and encourage peer learning

1. Include stakeholders

Policymakers, CSOs and implementers gain a different perspective on their programmes when they are part of defining evaluation questions, choosing the evaluation design and methods, participating in the actual evaluation, and making sense of data.

The new insights and momentum created by an evaluation can motivate more evaluation.

FROM THE FIELD

South Africa's Department of Social Development was one of the first departments to engage with the Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation in the early days of the country's National Evaluation System. The evaluation of the Early Childhood Development programme was used to test and develop different elements of the system. In 2017, most evaluations carried out through the NES were still coming from the Department of Social Development.

Read more about South Africa's NES in 'Developing South Africa's national evaluation policy and system: First lessons learned' by I Goldman, JE Mathe, C Jacob, A Hercules, M Amisi, T Buthelezi ***et al.***

2. Train programme implementers

In evaluation training, programme implementers discover what evaluation is, what it does, how it differs from other disciplines like auditing and monitoring, and the kind of evidence it offers. This is particularly useful where evaluation is emergent and there is little known about it.

3. Study tours and peer learning

Policymakers and programme implementers may appreciate the importance of evaluation more easily if they study evaluation systems and approaches in other countries or in different ministries in their own country. This exposure has the potential to inspire and stimulate the demand for evaluation. Study tours and peer learning should not encourage mimicry, however.

FROM THE FIELD

Study tours and peer learning were used extensively in the development of the South African, Uganda and Benin NESs.

EMERGING ISSUE 2: IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, EVALUATION IS STILL EMERGING AS A DISCIPLINE

Evaluation as a form of social research is a developing discipline in Africa. Evaluation tools and methods are not always obvious to those who are not involved in it, nor what sets it apart from other disciplines. The spectrum of what is considered to be "evaluation" is wide.

Few African countries have people who identify themselves as evaluators. Because there are few organisations hiring evaluators and even fewer evaluations being commissioned locally, people who do identify as evaluators feel that specialising in evaluation can limit their job prospects and business opportunities. Some members of local VOPEs are not in fact practicing evaluation, or what they do does not always fit a narrow definition of programme evaluation. This is not to say that programmes are not being evaluated.

Evaluators can respond to what policymakers and programme implementers need without being constrained by rigid discipline boundaries. In most countries, there are organisations working to understand government budget processes, policies and programme

implementation, but using methods and approaches that do not always neatly fit established notions of what an evaluation is. Though these initiatives are not always systematic and rarely unpack the logical framework/results framework or theory of change of the entire policy/programme, what they produce offers great insight into a programme's performance.

CLEAR-AA RECOMMENDS

There is no need for organisations interested in evaluation capacity-building to push predetermined definitions, methods and criteria. Rather, we can learn from what is already happening and strengthen it by bringing more rigour or systematic analysis. A narrow definition of evaluation may exclude local practitioners who have contributed significantly to evidence-based programming, policymaking and decision-making in their countries.

CLEAR-AA RECOMMENDS

Evaluation methods should be African-focused and produce the episteme which is relevant and context-specific for African programmes. Currently, evaluation practice is dominated by mimicry. Methods are developed in either donor development programmes or in developed countries, and due consideration is not given to their applicability or the resources needed to carry out them out.

FROM THE FIELD

Some civil society organisations in Uganda are tracking government investment in education and education outcomes, helping parents to "evaluate" public education investment through their lived experiences.

EMERGING ISSUE 3: THE PERCEPTION, PRACTICE AND USE OF EVALUATION IS HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY BROADER SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

The purpose of evaluation is to influence decisions about the design and implementation of policies and programmes. Evaluation is crucial to:

- establishing the effect of government or donor policies and programmes
- facilitating accountability to the beneficiaries of policies and programmes.

But evaluation practice cannot be abstracted from the socio-political context within which it takes place.

CLEAR-AA's regional strategy workshop discussions reflected that in most countries where CLEAR-AA works the predominant culture discourages open criticism in both public and political spaces.

A government's ideological and philosophical underpinnings dominate over evaluative evidence.

Read more about overall government performance and declining civil and political rights in Africa, including concerns about worsening indicators of freedom of expression, in the Mo Ibrahim Foundation's index of African governance.

Development is political by nature. It involves making decisions about benefits and exclusions. It is an expression of inequitable power and influence, both historical and contemporary. The history of colonialism and liberation movements shape perceptions of government performance and their translation into living conditions, as well as how media reports get interrogated. Liberation governments are rarely seen to be at fault and are often given unchallenged legitimacy and hegemony to lead. Evaluators and Evaluation Capacity Development (ECD) institutions have to contend with the reality of doing evaluations in such context. To influence policy and programmes, evaluators need to be tactful and politically savvy.

Without due cognizance, politics can ruin evaluation efforts, particularly to provide reliable information.

Participants at our workshops were of the view that it is a public secret that most government evaluation results are romanticised, using doctored evidence to create a good impression, and not representative of what is really happening. Hence a litany of policies and decisions are not informed by the knowledge delivered by evaluations, but rather by the ideologies and manifestos of politicians and evaluations commissioners.

CLEAR-AA RECOMMENDS

Evaluators and ECD organisations need to operate in ways that advocate and promote the use of evaluative evidence without challenging the political power of ruling parties or aligning with opposition politics. We need to strive to build and sustain trusting relationships with policymakers. We need to bring sensitivity to our communications on evaluation findings and their implications for policy and practice.

Most countries in which CLEAR-AA works face poverty and slow economic growth.

3 implications for evaluation in contexts of poverty and slow economic growth

1. The space is opened up for donors to dominate.
2. Evaluation is not upmost on governments' agendas.
3. Revenue streams for local evaluators are limited.

Poverty and slow economic growth open up space for donors to dominate

In the countries CLEAR-AA works with, most social development interventions are funded by international donors and multilateral development agencies. The evaluative culture is deeply embedded in and aligned with donor M&E systems, and divorced from National Evaluation Systems.

International donors and multilateral development agencies are often the biggest demanders of evaluation and the biggest employers of M&E practitioners.

CLEAR-AA RECOMMENDS

The influence and power of international donors and multilateral development agencies must be considered when planning interventions to strengthen evaluation practice. **Conversations about strengthening evaluation practice in the sub-Saharan region cannot exclude international donors and multilateral development agencies.** Furthermore, these institutions provide evaluation training to the organisations they fund.

Poverty and slow economic growth push evaluation lower down on governments' agendas

In undeveloped contexts, where communities live without the most basic services, public institutions often do not want to invest limited funds in doing evaluations at the cost of expanding service delivery. The benefits of doing evaluations and using evaluative evidence to direct public spending are not well established.

CLEAR-AA RECOMMENDS

Evaluators need to show how evaluations can help to optimise limited budgets.

Poverty and slow economic growth limit revenue streams for local evaluators

International donors and multilateral development agencies often recruit international evaluators to evaluate their programmes. Local evaluators are used for less technical activities such as data collection, and at lower rates than international evaluators. The growth in demand for evaluation expertise in a country is mostly not met by local evaluators. Local evaluators have limited opportunities to perfect their trade and contribute to evaluation scholarship. They also have limited sources of revenue, which is a disincentive for staying in the sector.

CLEAR-AA'S KEY RECOMMENDATION FOR STRENGTHENING REGIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY-BUILDING

Regional evaluators and ECD institutions must work with local partners in equal partnerships that allow for reciprocal flows of learning and sharing.

Organisations like CLEAR-AA who are interested in strengthening evaluation practice in Africa need to be openminded to organically emerging evaluation practices that might not neatly fit the definition of evaluations, but which nonetheless provide very useful – and used – evidence. Let us avoid repeating what African evaluators have criticised international development agencies for doing: Despite the rhetoric of strengthening evaluation capacity, intellectual imperialism and the unequal donor-recipient relationship have treated African countries and scholars as incapable of developing evaluation theories. Regional organisations like CLEAR-AA need to work with local partners in equal partnerships that allow for the reciprocal flow of learning and sharing. This could be a way to address the uneven distribution of evaluation capacity and governance quality in Africa.

FIND OUT MORE

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