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ANGLOPHONE AFRICA

DISCUSSION PAPER

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN THE M&E SECTOR



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PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN THE M&E SECTOR

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African Evaluation Association
Promoting Africa-rooted and Africaled evaluation

AfrEA

Association Africaine d'Evaluation
Promouvoir l'évaluation conçue et pilotée par l'Afrique

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. METHODS 2

2.1 Limitations 3

3. CONTEXT OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN AFRICA 4

4. FINDINGS 7

4.1 VOPEs: Form, governance, and capacity 7

4.2 The role of VOPEs in country M&E systems and capacity strengthening 11

4.3. Important partnerships for VOPEs 17

4.4. Key challenges VOPEs face 22

5. CONCLUSION 27

5.1. Main themes from the paper 27

5.2 Reconsidering VOPEs in the countries' M&E ecosystems 28

5.3. How can the challenges VOPEs face be addressed? 32

5.3 Supporting VOPEs to address internal constraints 35

5.4 Supporting VOPEs to address external threats 36

REFERENCES 38

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of formalised evaluation societies/associations, known as Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs), has grown (Kriel, 2006). The International Organization for Cooperation on Evaluation's (IOCE) database boasts 120 national VOPEs. Globally, 32 000 individuals are registered with evaluation associations (Piciotto, 2019:93). In addition to the national associations, the M&E sector has also seen the emergence of regional bodies which represent groups of national VOPEs and these include the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) and the European Evaluation Society (EES). According to the IOCE, 19 VOPEs are categorised as regional. Global bodies such as the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) and the international umbrella body for associations, the IOCE, have also been established in the global M&E ecosystem (Kriel, 2006).

There are 41 associations in different African countries affiliated with AfrEA. These associations are of different sizes, structure, and capacity. The structure of associations and their functionality is shaped by the local context, access to resources, organisational capacity, and leadership. The way that African VOPEs work and the issues that they face are well documented. Despite the increasing number of research studies on VOPEs' contribution to the development of M&E, adaptive management and evidence-informed policy making in different countries; the research remains inadequate.

The Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results, Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) and the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) commissioned a discussion paper to document the experiences of M&E/evaluation associations in Africa. The discussion paper focuses on a select number of VOPEs on the continent. It explores their functionality, the work they are doing, the challenges they face and the opportunities that exist to strengthen their contributions to both national and regional M&E ecosystems.

The discussion paper was guided by the following seven questions:

- What is the status of VOPE membership, structure, capacity and functionality?
- What are the primary objectives for the creation of VOPEs?
- What role/s do VOPEs play in country M&E systems and capacity strengthening?
- How is this role understood by VOPEs themselves and other stakeholders?
- What are the current VOPE activities and approaches to strengthening M&E systems?
- What are the enabling factors and barriers to VOPEs' development and contribution to country M&E systems?
- What synergies and networks do VOPEs have with other stakeholders?

2. METHODS

The project was initially commissioned as a desktop review to establish the status of VOPEs in English-speaking African countries where CLEAR-AA operates. The project was necessitated by an increasing number of requests for technical support by VOPEs in these countries. The purpose and focus of the project was altered slightly after initial consultations with AfrEA.

The discussion paper draws information primarily from desktop review and informant interviews with selected VOPEs. The extensive literature review on evaluation associations included topics such as how evaluation associations have evolved over the years, the form they take, and the challenges they face. In addition, a comprehensive analysis of the work of nine VOPEs in Africa was conducted. This included an analysis of the information available on their websites such as membership, activities, annual plans, and constitutions, amongst others. The analysis was conducted on VOPEs in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Senegal, Cameroon, Zambia and Ghana. Information about Namibia was sourced primarily through interviews because the Namibian VOPE is still in its formative stage and many of the governance requirements have not yet been developed. The VOPEs were purposefully selected and represent English-speaking countries with which CLEAR-AA is working and, as suggested by AfrEA, the study also included two French-speaking national VOPEs. Though this segment of the analysis is limited, it nevertheless provided useful information about VOPE capacities and limitations.

Findings from the literature review and the document review were presented at a workshop held virtually on the 5 November 2020. The purpose of the workshop was to:

- Test emerging findings from the ongoing study;
- Explore how the VOPEs' contribution to M&E systems is understood by VOPEs themselves and by other partners including governments, donors/development partners;
- Identify factors that limit or enable VOPEs' contribution to the M&E systems of their respective countries; and
- Explore the support needed by VOPEs to enable them to effectively contribute to M&E systems and development agendas in their countries.

The workshop was attended by 27 participants from different countries and organisations. Fifteen of the participants represented VOPEs, this included two AfrEA board members and the secretariat. Ten participants were partner organisations, including UNICEF regional and country offices, CLEAR-AA, CLEAR-FA, IOCE, and the African Development Bank, and two participants were from government departments.

The webinar workshop was crucial in the research process both for testing the emerging findings but also to address some of the gaps in the findings. To do this, participants were divided into four groups for discussion on the status of VOPEs in Africa. Each group was asked to provide feedback on the research findings presented and answer the following questions:

- Is there anything about your country/continent context that makes VOPE work different/challenging/interesting?
- In which areas of work have VOPEs on the African continent experienced success?
- What challenges do VOPEs face?
- How could the challenges be addressed?
- How can the work of VOPEs be strengthened?

In addition, partners were grouped and took part in a facilitated discussion answering the following questions:

- Is there anything about your country/continent context that makes VOPE work different/challenging/interesting?
- What types of support have you provided to VOPEs?
- What partnerships have you had with VOPEs?
- What has worked well and what has worked less successfully in supporting VOPEs?
- How could the role/work of VOPEs be better supported?

These discussions were insightful. They highlighted that the findings from the desktop review were valid and consistent with the experiences of VOPEs. In addition, they provided qualitative findings to explain what the research had found during the document review.

After the virtual workshop, three follow up interviews were held with three VOPEs to explore aspects of the information provided during the workshop. Three interviews, lasting an hour each, were held with the Chairperson of the Zimbabwe Evaluation Association (ZEA), the Namibia Evaluation Association (NEA), and the Honorary Chair of Senegal Evaluation Association (SenEval). These three interviews provided additional insights into the function of the individual VOPEs. While it is understood that these three VOPEs are not representative of all VOPEs in Africa, the intention was to clarify the information already collected by exploring some of the innovative work that is taking place and the specific challenges that each of these three VOPES might face due to their context.

2.1 Limitations

The methods used in this study have their limitations. Most VOPEs do not update their websites and some of the information was dated. In cases where this outdated information was considered to impact materially on the analysis, follow ups were done with individual VOPEs to obtain the latest information and updates. This limitation is acknowledged. Despite some limitations, the approach taken is sufficient for the purpose of the discussion paper. The intention of the project was to review what is known about VOPEs in Africa and for the discussion paper to serve as a discussion document to stimulate thinking about strategies to sharpen work with VOPEs. It was not intended to be survey of all VOPEs in Africa. The data that was collected during the project has been triangulated with existing literature on VOPEs and the interviews with VOPEs, and the alignment between the different sources provides reassurance that, despite its limitations, the findings of the discussion paper are valid.

3. CONTEXT OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN AFRICA

To sufficiently contextualise VOPEs in Africa and to answer questions relating to their functionality and effectiveness, it is important to outline the environment within which monitoring and evaluation as a practice, profession, and discipline operates.

Unless the findings and subsequent recommendations of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) are used to improve development management practices, the processes themselves have no inherent value. M&E has value when it is used to design development interventions which enable organisations to learn and become more effective, thereby increasing the likelihood of development interventions achieving positive outcomes or, at least, increasing the likelihood of managers identifying failure early enough to respond. The value of M&E, therefore, lies in its use by public management institutions and society to improve governance and achieve accountability (Mackay, 2007), and by enabling learning and improvements to take place in policies and programmes. The use of M&E evidence is enhanced where there is general openness to change, new ideas, and independence. The opposite is also true, with evidence showing that genuine monitoring and evaluation practice cannot be conducted effectively in situations where decision making is undemocratic, there is no culture of acknowledging problems, and there is a lack of openness to learning (Goldman & Pabari, 2020).

The genesis of M&E within the public sector in Africa can be traced back to the days of structural adjustment and the influence of aid as many countries emerged from post-colonial conflict (Basheka & Byamugisha, 2015). M&E was often a requirement of aid agencies for governments and NGOs to demonstrate value for money but also to be accountable to funders. Therefore, as Fraser and Morkel (2020) contend, the genesis of M&E was not an endogenous or intrinsic desire to do things better but was an imposition from funders (Fraser & Morkel, 2020). It is only recently that governments have been increasingly demanding M&E, though this is focused more on monitoring than evaluation, and is still dependent on international donor communities for funding (Porter & Goldman, 2013). The increase in demand for M&E by governments is predicated by the adoption of New Public Management principles within government which consist of decentralisation and devolution, the flattening of organisational structures, and emphasis on processes which create value for the citizens. This adopts the principles of the 'management by results' approach and makes use of modern information technologies functioning within the system of network connections (Engela & Ajam, 2010; Basheka, 2016). M&E has also been supported by development partners who have shifted towards supporting country-led monitoring and evaluation systems.

A significant M&E development on the continent is the institutionalisation of monitoring and evaluation within the public service. Governments in Uganda, Benin, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia, among others, have been institutionalising M&E, though to varying degrees and measures. These efforts to institutionalise M&E includes the establishment of M&E ministries or government bodies to coordinate M&E, as is the case in Ghana, South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania, etc. In Ghana, for example, the government has steadily put in place institutions to coordinate M&E in government. Since 1992 the National Development Planning Commission has had the constitutional mandate to monitor, evaluate and coordinate all development programmes in Ghana. A formal M&E framework began with the implementation of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2003. In addition, the presidency established the ministry of M&E in 2017 (CLEAR-AA, 2019).

In Kenya, institutionalisation has experienced ebbs and flows, starting in 2000 when the IMF/World Bank Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper precipitated Kenya's early attempts at a government-wide M&E system. Kenya has also made progress in local level institutionalisation through the County Integrated Monitoring

and Evaluation System (CIMES). Senegal has also gradually moved towards country-driven M&E following the structural adjustment programme of the 1990s, where M&E was a condition imposed by donors. The foundation for M&E in Senegal was established in the early work of the Ministry of Planning and the ***Direction de la Coopération Economique et Financière*** (DCEF). In 2003, the Senegalese government established a National Programme for Good Governance (NPGG) which was piloted through the ***Délégation Chargée de la Réforme de l'Etat et l'Assistance Technique*** (DGREAT) (Lomeña-Gelis, 2013). Recently, development partners in Senegal have turned their attention to country-led M&E by supporting government to build an M&E system These are positive indications that M&E is expanding in various African countries, albeit slowly.

Monitoring and evaluation have not equally expanded in the different countries. Governments have had more success with institutionalising monitoring by setting up systems and tools for tracking performance but the same attention has not been given to evaluation practice (Porter & Goldman, 2013; CLEAR-AA, 2019; Fraser & Morkel, 2020). A few countries have made significant progress with institutionalising evaluation. Much has been written about Uganda, Benin and South Africa's experience with institutionalising evaluations (Goldman et al., 2015; Goldman et al., 2018). In Senegal, the Direction de la Planification Nationale (DPN) has been responsible of implementing evaluations, though its performance has been slow, having conducted only 20 evaluations between 2008 and 2013 (Lomeña-Gelis, 2013).

Despite governments adopting M&E as a public service management tool, severe constraints remain. Some of the challenges are discipline related. Although the practice of tracking and evaluating performance is as old as mankind, M&E as a professional discipline underpinned by a distinguishable lexicon, tools and theories, is relatively new (Picciotto, 2019). Thus, many within the public service still do not fully understand what M&E is, the purpose it serves, or how it differs from other social science methods of enquiry and other public service management tools such as auditing. Policy actors also do not inherently understand the dangers of failing to monitor or evaluate their programmes, largely because they have historically operated without M&E (Amisi & Chirau, 2018) and previous experiences with M&E focused on upward accountability and not on organisational learning (Lomofsky & Grout-Smith, 2020). Also, much of what is taught on the topic of evaluation originates from the Global North, particularly the United States (Cloete, 2016), although African scholarship on M&E is growing. An issue that has been hotly debated is the limited extent to which current M&E methods and theories are localised. This represents a gap in the knowledge in terms of how to respond in contexts where there are fewer resources, there is different organisational culture, and capacities are limited. This shortcoming is exacerbated by the unequal power between Global North and Global South countries in determining what is regarded as good quality M&E. Lastly, M&E has been criticised for failing to deliver transformational change, as most professional practice of M&E has been motivated by government compliance requirements and has not led to learning and policy improvements (Lomeña-Gelis, 2013; Lomofsky & Grout-Smith, 2020).

Some of the constraints facing M&E practice relate to the wider social, political and economic context. According to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG), on average, African governments' performance on freedom of expression scores has continued to decline since 2013 after showing earlier progress. Between 2013 and 2017, freedom of expression became the fifth most deteriorated indicator in the IIAG with 90.7% of Africa's citizens and organisations regarding their freedom to express opinions as having diminished. In addition, since 2008 civil rights and liberties have deteriorated consistently, with the decline having worsened in the past five years. This can be interpreted as almost 70.0% of Africa's citizens living in a country where civil rights and liberties have been curtailed in the past decade. Lastly, civil society participation has also experienced a downward trend, despite a short improvement between 2009 and 2012. The earlier progress made on the continent has been reversed, and the 2017 African average score is worse than ten years earlier. Over the past decade, the IIAG found that in 27 African countries, governments have restricted the participation of civil society actors in the political process and diminished the freedom of NGOs (Mo Imbrahim Foundation, 2020). In Kenya, for example, despite CSOs being recognised through the Public Benefit Organisations Act (2013) which allows them to hold government to account, a culture of mistrust

and suspicion among CSOs and other non-state actors in public sector remains. Consequently, organisations do not share M&E reports with each other or government (CLEAR-AA, 2019). This is a worrying trend as it is a deterrent to the meaningful use of M&E.

The context within which M&E is implemented in different African countries is dynamic and evolving, and is also complex and inconsistent across the different countries. While, to a large extent, countries are democratising and there is an openness to diverse voices in the public space, constraints still remain. The context is also becoming increasingly volatile as new and unpredictable threats to democracy and wellbeing emerge. Global pandemics such as COVID-19, growing class inequality, corruption, climate change, etc. are all challenges to which countries must respond. It is within this context of complex development challenges that M&E must provide relevant evidence to policy actors, and VOPEs are ideally placed to promote context-relevant M&E practice.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 VOPEs: Form, governance, and capacity

VOPEs in Africa take different forms, and the various forms and functionality are shaped by local context, access to resources, organisational capacity, and leadership. In addition, VOPEs are referred to by different names. Some incorporate themselves as evaluation societies, or forums, while others use the concept of associations. Some VOPEs focus exclusively on evaluations, as is the case in Senegal, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Kenya, where the VOPEs chose to incorporate as evaluation associations or evaluation societies. This is interesting because VOPEs are also present in countries where there has not been significant progress with expanding evaluation of public policies and programmes, and where governments have not budgeted for evaluation of programmes (CLEAR-AA, 2019). The choice in name could also be aspirational, indicating a choice to promote evaluation. The exclusion of monitoring could also just be in the name and not in practice. For example, though TanEA only mentions evaluation, its membership includes monitoring professionals. Other VOPEs incorporate both monitoring and evaluation practice, as is the case of the Zambia Monitoring and Evaluation Association (ZaMEA), and the Ghana Monitoring and Evaluation Forum (GMEF).

How VOPEs balance the monitoring/evaluation agenda is also reflected in what they aim to achieve in their respective countries. The Zimbabwe Evaluation Association's (ZEA) intention is to promote an enabling environment for evaluation, to build evaluation competencies, and to strengthen the utilisation of evaluation in Zimbabwe. It is clear from their mission statement that the intent is to build evaluation capacity. While Tanzania Evaluation Association's (TanEA) mission is articulated as to "promote and strengthen evaluation practices in Tanzania through capacity building, advocacy, professional development and networking", in practice the VOPE has not solely driven the evaluation agenda. TanEA has incorporated monitoring professionals and provides capacity-building activities targeting monitoring professionals (CLEAR-AA & TanEA, 2020).

The Uganda Evaluation Association (UEA) also has clear objectives to promote evaluation. Its mission and objectives include an emphasis on building evaluation practice, profession and community in the country. The GMEF states that its mission is to promote and enable the use of monitoring and evaluation in programme implementation and policy planning. The mission of ZaMEA, which was formed after the merger of the two previous VOPEs in Zambia, is to support the M&E profession's objective of promoting national development and it does so by promoting ethical standards, capacity building, and advocacy. Their focus, therefore, is on both monitoring and evaluation. The Evaluation Society of Kenya's (ESK) mission is to promote professionalisation, capacity building, advocacy, utilisation, and the sound governance of monitoring, evaluation and research practice. The Senegal Evaluation Association (SenEval) was established to promote a culture of evaluation in Senegal and, more broadly, in the West Africa region, and its driving forces have included 1) development of evaluation capacities, starting with its own members; 2) advocacy for the promotion of a culture of evaluation at the national level; and 3) development of the institutionalisation of evaluation by the state.

Our analysis shows that even when the mission of a VOPE may be articulated as being primarily focused on evaluation, in practice this can be different. VOPEs focus on a wide variety of activities and recognise the symbiotic relationship between monitoring and evaluation, and other aspects such as data management, data visualisation, research, policy analysis etc. Also, in most countries the monitoring systems are likely to be well established relative to evaluation systems, and consequently there is a readily accessible community of monitoring practitioners compared to evaluation practitioners.

All the VOPES reviewed have written constitutions that govern the affairs of the association and which are endorsed by members and a board democratically elected from the membership. They provide regular feedback to members on the performance of the association and its annual plans.

The VOPEs reviewed generally function well – elections are held regularly and changes in leadership are usually implemented efficiently. In cases of governance challenges within VOPEs, these have been ably resolved. For example, in 2017 ZEA experienced some challenges during a change of leadership. This was as a result of resignations from the board which weakened the organisation. However, following the appointment of a new chairperson and new board members, the organisation resumed operations efficiently. The recent leadership change in ESK ran smoothly and did not affect the VOPE's work. Nonetheless, from the information gathered during interviews and discussions at the workshop, it was evident that new board members often need orientation in organisational administration and VOPE governance.

Most VOPEs are relatively young, particularly when compared to other professions pushing for similar levels of influence over public policies. Of the nine VOPEs reviewed in detail, seven were established in the 2000s (See Figure 1 below).

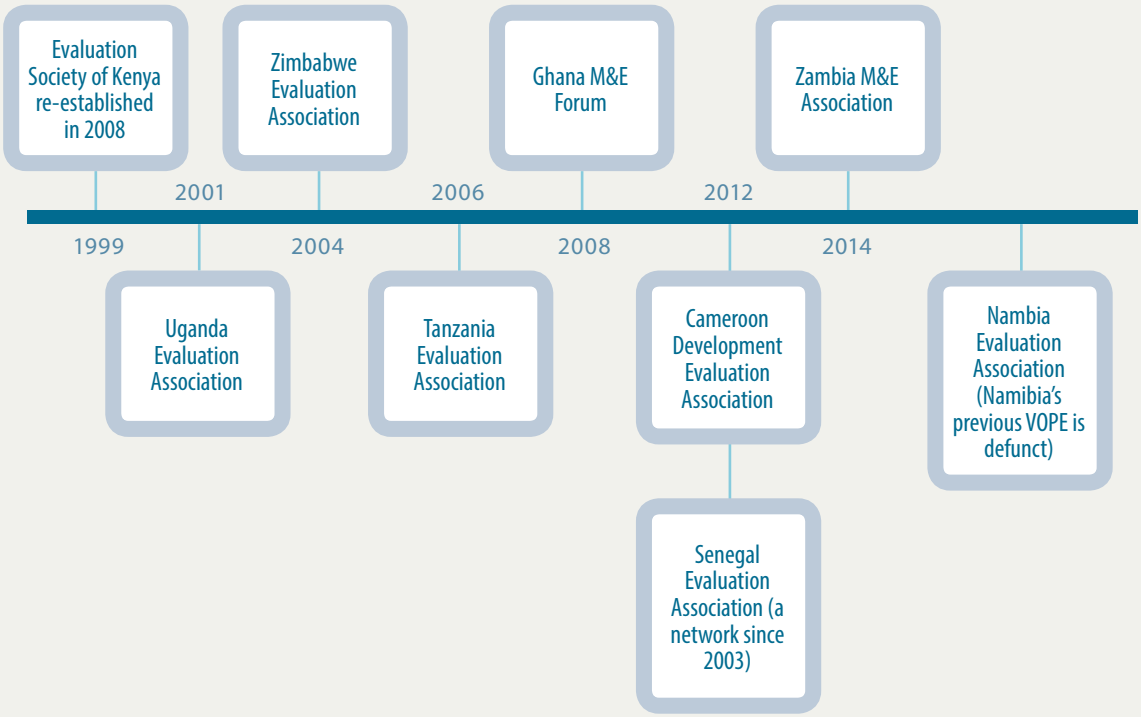


Figure 1: VOPE establishment

All VOPEs are Not-for-Profit (NPO) member-based organisations. They are governed and coordinated by a board or a steering committee nominated and appointed by members. Mandates of boards/committees are regulated, and their term is limited to between two and four years to ensure transfer of leadership. In addition, some associations like GMEF and TanEA have advisory committees. On average, VOPEs' governing bodies/boards/executive committees have eight members. Figure 2 below shows the size of the management structures of the VOPEs reviewed. In each VOPE there is clear attempt to ensure representation of different sectors, with governing bodies having representatives from government, civil society, and academia.



Figure 2: VOPE management structures indicating number of board members

Capacity challenge was a common theme in the validation workshop with VOPEs. Capacity constraints are experienced at two levels. The first level is governance – the capacity to implement systems to govern the work of the VOPEs. This includes compliance with national regulations for organisations, financial management systems, membership management, etc. A major challenge for VOPEs is securing a full-time secretariat. For several years ZEA was able to afford a full-time secretariat. This was made possible by means of direct funding from UNICEF. At the time of writing, this funding had been depleted and ZEA was unable to renew the administrator's contract. SenEval has been able to maintain a paid secretariat by employing graduate students to fill the position. This model has worked for SenEval, though it is not ideal because there is a high turnover in the position. UEA has also had a dedicated administrator-run secretariat for the past 6 years. The secretariat function is important for VOPEs as it is effectively the hub of the organisation. The secretariat manages the day-to-day operations of the VOPE, such as scheduling meetings, minuting meetings, responding to partners' needs, managing projects, financial management, organising activities, and managing members. In the absence of a strong secretariat, the activities of the VOPE have to be undertaken by the governing bodies. Most individuals are elected to serve in the board/executive committees as they are well established in the sector, meaning that they are likely to hold senior positions with associated heavy responsibilities in their own organisations. It is, therefore, not possible for these individuals to drive the strategic agenda of the VOPE and simultaneously manage day to day management of the VOPE.

Secondly, VOPEs have limited capacity to implement activities. This presents problems for VOPEs seeking to undertake the strategic activities necessary to strengthen national M&E capacity. This is also attributable to a lack of financial resources and the limited supply of M&E practitioners in the country willing and able to volunteer their time to implement programmes on behalf of the VOPEs. This point was made clear by one of the participants in the workshop:

> *"We have parliamentary agreement but to operationalise this we need a lot of resources. Converting opportunities to long-term benefits has been a challenge. We cannot do the work by ourselves. We need AfrEA, IOCE to help. We wanted to build capacity of Office of President and Cabinet and Ministries. But it exceeds VOPE capacity. We need strategic partnerships."* – ***Workshop participant***

The statement above indicates that, despite challenges, there are favourable conditions for VOPEs to promote the national M&E capacity development agenda, and to promote the demand for and use of M&E evidence. However, VOPEs are constrained by their limited financial resources, their reliance on volunteers, and by not having a permanent and stable secretariat.

4.1.1 Membership

All VOPEs reviewed have experienced growth in membership since their establishment. Most VOPEs maintain a record of paid-up members and those who have not paid or renewed their membership (as shown in Figure 3 below). On average, VOPEs have a sizable membership base, but few members actively participate or contribute financially to its management.

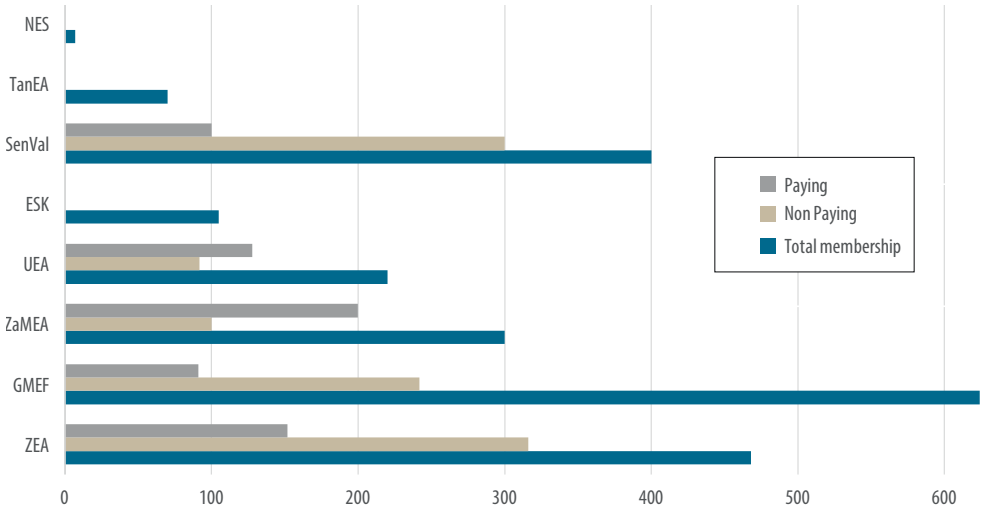


Figure 3: VOPE membership

VOPE members are not homogenous. Membership is made up of a range of practitioners in the development field including commissioners and users of evaluation, students, monitoring practitioners, evaluators, data scientists, as well as evaluation trainers or capacity-building practitioners (Tarsilla, 2012). Members come from diverse professional backgrounds and include economists, auditors, psychologists, epidemiologists, etc. Members also come from various sectors, including government agencies, civil society organisations, academia, consultancy firms, the private sector, donor agencies, parliament, and even the media. This gives VOPEs a unique opportunity to convene different stakeholders in countries' M&E ecosystems because each VOPE is effectively the central hub of evaluation supply and demand, and is therefore perfectly positioned to provide a unique bridging mechanism for widespread promotion of the benefits, use, and influence of evaluation (Holvoet & Dewachter, 2013). Furthermore, the broad and diverse membership allows for rapid dissemination of innovative experiences and best practices (Holvoet & Dewachter, 2013).

However, this research found that most VOPEs in Africa are not always successful in making use of the opportunities that a diverse membership could offer. VOPEs have not been able to actively engage their membership, they have not adequately articulated their value propositions for members and, as one of the interviewees stated, *"people do not see the value of paying for their membership"*.

With such a varied membership, it is important that VOPEs understand the composition of its membership – who members are, their skillsets, their needs, and what they can contribute to the VOPE/sector. VOPEs have made various attempts to understand their respective memberships. For example, SenEval conducts a basic survey of members on their mailing list. ZaMEA planned to conduct a survey of its members in its 2020 plans. These attempts have been inadequate to target capacity-building interventions or to elicit assistance and support for other strategic work. In previous research done by CLEAR-AA, TanEA reported not having adequate disintegrated membership data (CLEAR-AA & TanEA, 2020). An inadequate understanding of the membership makes it difficult for VOPEs to respond to the needs of their members and thereby grow the association and the profession. Consequently, membership levels have stagnated with most members failing to renew their membership and consequently becoming inactive in the professionalisation agenda. Also, few VOPEs make use of membership management software or systems for membership reminders and renewals.

These challenges are not new and Kriel (2006), summarising findings from a number of VOPE case studies, concluded that across different VOPEs the following membership challenges are experienced:

- Recognising and clearly defining the potential membership base;
- Accommodating the diverse needs of potential members in terms of different stakeholder interests, methodological practices, subject areas or topics, and geographical locations;
- Raising awareness among potential members;
- Providing the type and number of relevant services that members need and value;
- Setting membership fees at a level that is realistic when judged against the actual services provided; and
- Maintaining high-quality and inclusive communication services.

Despite these challenges, there is a membership base which VOPEs could leverage by utilising improved membership management strategies and by offering improved value to members. As M&E gains traction in different public service institutions on the continent, demand for M&E is set to increase, as will the number of practitioners in the field. VOPEs will need to improve their membership management strategies to be effective conveners and custodians of M&E practice and professionals in their countries.

4.2 The role of VOPEs in country M&E systems and capacity strengthening

To assess the role of VOPEs in their countries' M&E ecosystems, it is important to understand what is meant by the term ecosystem and who the key partners in the ecosystem are. An M&E ecosystem refers to the wider (sometimes) undefined and unrecognised conglomeration of organisations, institutions and individuals who generate or use various forms of monitoring and evaluation evidence. An M&E ecosystem is differentiated from M&E system or a national evaluation system, which is defined as a government-coordinated system. As shown in Figure 4 below, the M&E ecosystem is broader than government work. It is within the ecosystem that VOPEs have a critical role to play as they represent members from a variety of sectors and in the position to convene multi-sector discussions on M&E.

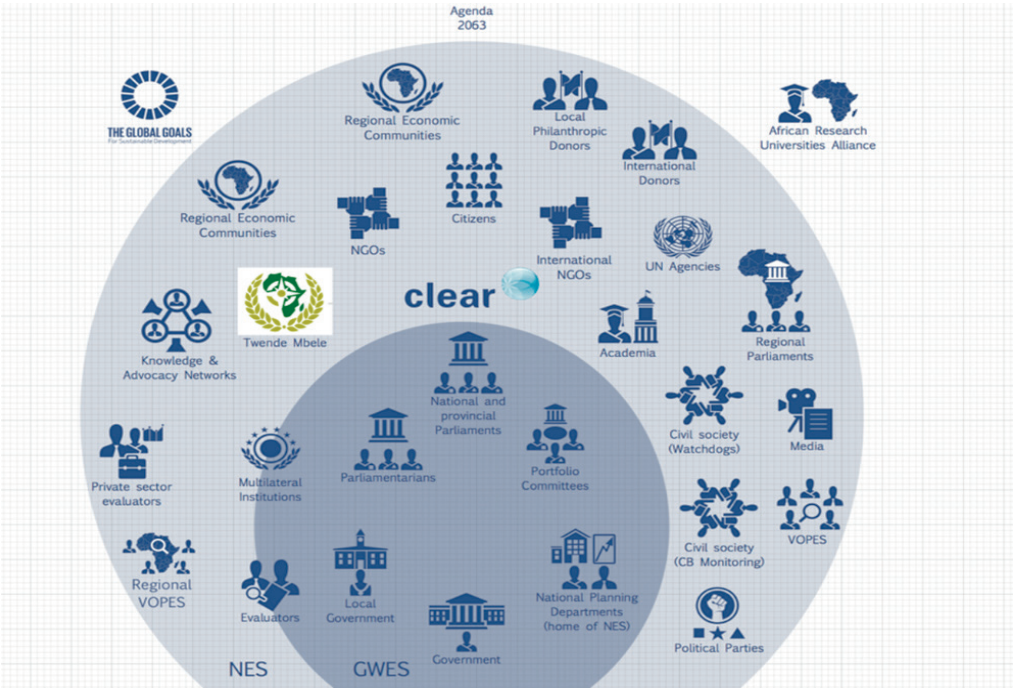


Figure 4: M&E ecosystem of African countries (*Source 1: CLEAR-AA)*

This discussion document explored the VOPEs' various activities and the challenges they face in the course of delivering on their mandates. As identified by Holvoet and Dewachter (2013), the five objectives that VOPEs should fulfil are: (1) to stimulate networks between M&E actors; 2) to improve the evaluation capacities of their members; 3) to increase evaluation practice; 4) to strengthen the use/influence of policy and programme evaluation; and 5) to increase government accountability toward its citizens. Each of these aspects are explored to determine what the VOPES involved in this study have implemented.

4.2.1 Building a community of practice

Most VOPEs began as informal networks of practitioners and, in some cases, commissioners/users of evaluation. The associations provide space for practitioners to engage one another, learn and share. Figure 5 below shows how the different VOPEs articulate this objective:

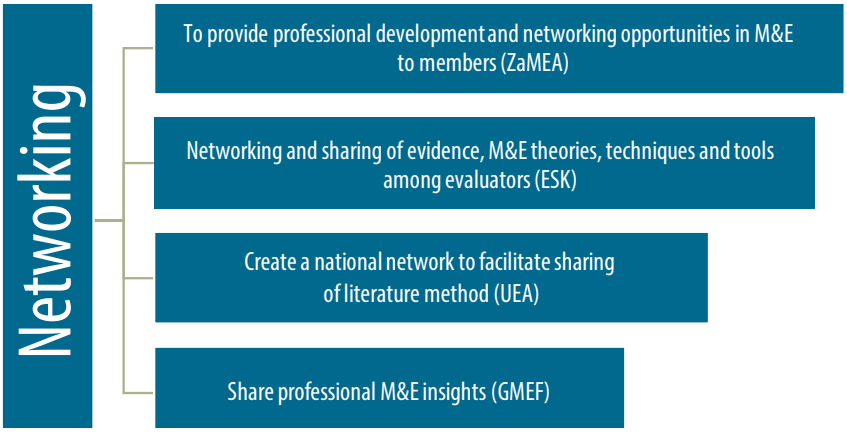


Figure 5: VOPE objective for professionals

Interestingly, ZaMEA also has as the objective "To represent members' interests to relevant stakeholders including government and employers". The extent to which a VOPE can achieve this objective remains an open question given the situation where evaluation/M&E is not fully professionalised and lacks distinct tools, mandatory training, a common curriculum, and shared standards. In addition, VOPEs represent professionals in a wide variety of fields, ranging from evaluation practitioners and users of information to those in the data sector.

From the data collected, it is evident that VOPEs are creating platforms where evaluators can disseminate their evaluation findings, learn new evaluation techniques, think about the role of evaluation in society from different perspectives, promote professional ethical standards, and contribute to the development of the profession – each of which is achieved to varying degrees. By participating in international networks and forums, VOPEs are providing a platform for discourse on development and engaging in outreach and publicity to recruit new members and forge strategic partnerships (Holvoet & Dewachter, 2013). Furthermore, having a regional body that represents the interests of African VOPEs has elevated the voice of African evaluators on international platforms, such as the International Organisation for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE), and has also been pivotal for the emergence of evaluation as a profession in Africa (Cloete, 2016).

4.2.2 Strengthening members' capacity

A review of activities in which VOPEs are involved shows that capacity building is foremost amongst the VOPEs' activities and in which they have been relatively successful. VOPEs implement a range of activities to strengthen members' technical capacity. This includes continuous professional development training on specific methods or tools, for example SPSS trainings provided by ZEA to members and training on data collection, analysis and visualisation which is provided by GMEF. It also includes development of educational programmes in cooperation with local and foreign educational institutions. For example, SenEval has been

innovative in using international evaluators visiting Senegal to provide workshops or training at minimal or no cost to the local association.

VOPEs have also been active in hosting regular webinars on topical M&E issues. Some also report peer-to-peer learning exchanges. ZEA reported that they had facilitated peer-to-peer exchanges with GMEF and ESK, and had also organised some exchanges with ZaMEA. All VOPEs, except for Namibia which is still in a developmental stage, report hosting regular conferences and workshops. The conferences or so-called 'M&E weeks' are important activities in the calendar of M&E practitioners in the various countries. VOPEs have been able to secure participation of their respective national governments and other key partners in their conferences and workshops. For example, the government of Uganda is a key participant in the Ugandan M&E week. GMEF regularly partners with the Ghanaian government in their activities. Even when government is the main host, as was the case with the Kenya evaluation week in 2018, the VOPEs collaborate with government in the delivery of workshops.

These findings are consistent with existing literature. Holvoet and Dewachter (2013) argue that VOPEs regard capacity building as one of their most important goals and therefore play a crucial role in evaluation capacity development (ECD). However, certain challenges are evident in terms of how VOPEs implement capacity-building initiatives.

Firstly, there is no demonstrable evidence of how the VOPEs empirically evaluate whether the activities they implement are effective, if the activities reach their members, and how the activities contribute towards building national M&E capacity. This raises questions on the extent to which VOPEs fully understand the M&E capacity gaps they seek to address and the effectiveness of their interventions. Nonetheless, it is clear that capacity building remains an important area of work. Most practitioners enter the M&E field without any formal training on M&E though, as the case of TanEA demonstrates, most practitioners have some research background. Considering that VOPE members also occupy different roles in their organisations and in the M&E field, it follows that VOPEs need to implement various types of activities. But as most VOPEs do not have baseline data relating to capacity gaps and needs, it is impossible for VOPEs to know with certainty if what they are providing is what members need or, on a broader scale, exactly what is needed in the country to progress the M&E agenda.

Secondly, most of the training that VOPEs provide seems to target evaluators or M&E practitioners to strengthen the generation of evaluation evidence. In some places this trend has been shifting, with VOPEs making attempts to address the 'demand side' of M&E. Nonetheless, it appears that fewer capacity-building interventions focus on meeting the needs of commissioners and policy actors. VOPEs do not seem to have invested resources in building the capacity for the demand, commissioning, and use of M&E evidence.

Lastly, it has previously been argued that African VOPEs have often been ineffective in matching the supply of and demand for evaluation at country level. This has primarily been because commissioners (mostly development partners and NGOs funded by international donors) have been reluctant to use local evaluators. In cases where local evaluators have been used, their role has been that of 'local' partners of a global evaluation company – a role which has largely been reduced to local data collection or facilitation access for global partners and has involved little analysis and report writing (Amisi & Chirau, 2018; Emerson, 2020). This calls into question the power dynamics around who commissions evaluations and the degrees of inclusivity involved in the process. A positive development in Africa is that, through AfrEA, progress has been made in establishing an agenda for an Africa-centric approach to evaluation that takes cognisance of African culture, history and beliefs (Smith et al., 2019).

4.2.3 Strengthen M&E practice

According to Rodriguez-Bilella (2017), global awareness of evaluation has increased alongside concerns related to its practice and legitimacy. Perceptions of poor quality of evaluations, blurred boundaries between evaluations and other performance management disciplines, and lack of clear and well- established credentials and standards for those practicing evaluation, have eroded the legitimacy of evaluation (Rodriguez-Bilella, 2017). Though the professionalisation debate has been ongoing and highly contentious and, it is because of issues raised by Rodriguez-Bilella, that it remains a topical issue. VOPEs are at the cusp of the professionalisation debate and process. Important questions in the professionalization debate are: 'How can evaluators consistently produce good quality evidence?'; 'What ethical codes are evaluators held to?'; and 'How is evaluation distinguished from other forms of evidence?'. VOPEs have responded to these questions in various ways. The Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) adopted a competency-based approach, called Professional Designation Program, founded on three pillars – the codes of ethics, standards, and competencies. CES awards accredited evaluator status to recognised competent evaluators. In 2016, the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Monitoring, Evaluation and Systematization (ReLAC) developed evaluation standards for Latin America and the Caribbean. The aim was to provide sound and contextually relevant guidance for high-quality evaluations, professional training and practice, the facilitation of communication amongst all involved, the advancement of learning and knowledge, and the promotion of an evaluation and socially responsible culture (Rodríguez-Bilella et al., 2016). The ANZEA evaluator competencies for Aotearoa New Zealand were completed in 2011 with the aim of promoting quality evaluation practice (Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association, 2011), and the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) published its evaluators' professional learning competencies in 2013.

In Africa, professionalisation of evaluation is an important goal for some of the VOPEs reviewed. A closer look at the activities implemented by VOPEs showed that VOPEs have been more successful in the provision of capacity-building activities than with the development of infrastructure to support professionalization, although there has been some activity in this area. For example, in 2012 the UEA developed evaluation standards for Uganda. The standards were to guide the design, conduct, management, and dissemination of information for key national evaluations. In 2015, the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) and the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) participated in a study to explore the professionalisation path for South Africa. In 2020, SAMEA published a final draft competencies framework for evaluators in South Africa. The framework draws from international experience and from the DPME competencies framework. It defines five competency domains and 54 basic competencies for evaluators (Goremucheche & Wildschut, 2020). An important step in the professionalisation debate on the African continent is the development of evaluation standards by AfrEA for evaluations conducted in Africa. The 2020 draft document provides a set of principles that apply to professionals dealing with evaluation in Africa – irrespective of where in the world professionals are based. The guidelines are a step closer to defining evaluation practice in Africa, as they reflect the demand for evaluation that is 'Made in Africa' (AfrEA, 2020).

Academic institutions are important stakeholders in the strengthening of evaluation practice. Academic institutions create the knowledge building blocks of the discipline, by defining the curriculum that is taught. In addition, they are centres for research and publication, and methodological innovation. Yet, this review found that the VOPEs' partnerships with academia have not been as well defined and effective as the partnerships forged with government and development partners. This review found few examples of collaborations or strategic partnerships with academic institutions. A Tanzanian participant at the workshop mentioned how TanEA has been trying to advocate for training institutions to include M&E as a subject in the curriculum or to motivate for collaboration with institutions of higher learning to improve the curriculum and to offer advice of mutual benefit. TanEA has been hosted by the Mzumbe University. However, the extent to which this has translated into influence over actual programmes of study at the university remains unclear. In addition, Adams et al. (2013) report that in 2013 GMEF conducted a feasibility study for a Master's Degree in Evaluation with the University of Ghana. This was done in collaboration with UNICEF and the University of Ghana. At the time it was said to be the first ever Master of Arts programme in evaluation in Ghana.

Regarding the role that VOPEs should play in academia, there are probably more questions than answers. With evaluation (and M&E) being a largely undefined and unregulated profession, what role should VOPEs play in academia? To what extent should VOPEs try to influence the teaching and training of M&E practitioners and, if so, how will they do it and do they have the capacity to do it? As it stands, most VOPEs lack both the capacity and the authority to check on or certify M&E courses or training. Without competencies frameworks or industry standards, it is doubtful that VOPEs will be able to guide the discipline of evaluation. Also, in most countries, other stakeholders (like universities) have more capacity than VOPEs.

Improving the quality of evaluation is reported to be a key objective of several VOPEs and with AfrEA driving the 'Made in Africa Evaluation' (MAE) initiative, there is growing recognition of the importance of critical engagement with the profession and the development of context-responsive frameworks to guide professionals. For example, TanEA is said to be committed to continuous quality improvement of the M&E profession in Tanzania by way of development, promotion and the adoption of sound ethical principles to ensure that evaluation contributes positively to sustainable national development (Holvoet et al., 2011). For a while ZaMEA has aimed to develop evaluation as a profession and to promote the highest levels of professionalism in evaluation in Zambia. In addition, it developed M&E competencies and published them in June 2020. A few of the VOPEs on the continent have developed evaluation standards. The UEA officially launched the Uganda Evaluation Standards in November 2013.

Kriel (2006) argues that although VOPEs have been keen to invest in capacity-building interventions, they have been hesitant to institute any form of quality control systems. For example, VOPEs have not instituted any mechanisms to ensure the quality of work produced by consultants, even for those who are affiliated. Kriel (2006) avers that this is understandable as most organisations are aiming to increase reach and participation. In this context it would be counterproductive to set criteria for participation that may alienate potential members who cannot meet very high standards.

The development of M&E or, more specifically, evaluation, as a profession seems to be progressing on the continent. While an increase in professional evaluation training is evident and VOPEs membership is growing (though slowly), national VOPEs have not approached the question of professionalisation strategically. Professionalisation debates have narrowly focused on defining competencies and skills building, and less so on incentivising theory development, interrogating usefulness/applicability of global evaluation frameworks, and dealing with issues of ethics, amongst others. VOPEs are currently focused on implementing individual capacity-building activities such as provision of training to members. This has been incredibly important both for visibility and for the contribution made to increasing the supply of M&E practitioners. While this is commendable, the focus on individual activities leaves VOPEs without spare capacity to dedicate to the more important M&E custodial role.

4.2.4 Strengthening national M&E ecosystem

As public benefit organisations, VOPEs play an important role in strengthening national M&E capacity as well as promoting the demand for and use of monitoring and evaluation evidence. Ultimately, the aim of conducting M&E is to influence the decisions made by programme implementers and policy makers. M&E is a management function allowing programme managers and policy actors to respond to complexity with intelligence. VOPEs, as custodians of M&E practice and as a duty to their professional membership, are responsible for promoting M&E evidence, demonstrating the value of M&E, and advocating for investment in monitoring and evaluation of public policies and programmes. Several VOPEs, including TanEA, ZEA, UEA, and GMEF, cite one of their primary objectives as being the promotion of the use of evidence informed by credible M&E practice. In addition, these VOPEs have been collaborating with their respective governments to strengthen national M&E capacity. For example, ZEA signed an MoU with the Parliament of Zimbabwe to encourage parliamentarians to use M&E evidence in their oversight function. Although ZEA has struggled with implementing some of the activities in the MoU, this is an important initiative indicating that the demand exists and that the value of M&E is recognised by both the VOPEs and parliament. In addition, ZEA has been working closely with the Cabinet office. In 2019 TanEA, in collaboration with CLEAR-AA, conducted training

on the importance of evaluation as an accountability tool for APNODE members in the Tanzania chapter. TanEA also partnered with UNICEF to raise awareness on the need for parliament to demand that evaluation is done by the executive. A two-day workshop was conducted in Dodoma involving a representative of the parliamentary committees (CLEAR-AA & TanEA, 2020).

This is consistent with literature, with Rugh (2014) stating that in countries where most evaluations are conducted to meet the demands of external donors, VOPEs have realised the importance of governments understanding the value of evaluation as a sound governance practice. Rugh (2014) referred to several cases where VOPEs had significantly influenced governments with respect to the design and monitoring of high-level policies at national, ministerial, and provincial levels.

In addition, VOPEs have increasingly been supporting governments' institutionalisation agendas. For example, the UEA works closely with the Ugandan government on evaluation capacity building to enable the practice of evaluation to flourish in the country (Goldman et al., 2018). It has further been found that the UEA has often adopted a partnership approach to evaluation capacity building (ECB) by working in close collaboration with government institutions and various international organisations to consolidate and strengthen evaluation capacity in Uganda. Working in collaboration with other stakeholders in Uganda as well as with development partners, UEA has also contributed to building the Ugandan government's M&E system (Basheka, 2016). SenEval also reported a close partnership with government, though there are still some gaps. The VOPE has been able to jointly host events with government to promote evaluation and their interventions seem to be gaining momentum. The Senegalese government is increasingly aware of evaluations and members of the VOPE have been invited as representatives of the association to comment on government evaluation ToRs, etc. – as indicated in the quote below:

> *"So we've done work with government advocating for evaluation, perhaps we should have done more but nevertheless we've had a few significant events…. The government is doing some strategic evaluations at the moment, they say…on universal healthcare, cash transfers and on the national strategy for child protection and... I have given comments on the terms of reference either directed to ministry when they ask me or through UNICEF …"* – ***KII SenEval***

According to Lomeña-Gelis (2013), it was SenEval's work promoting the institutionalisation of evaluation targeting principally the presidency of Senegal, DREAT, the General Directorate of Planning of the Ministry of Economy and Finances, and the Government Inspection Office (Inspection Générale d'Etat), that contributed to the government's decision in March 2012 to establish, in the President's office, a Commission for the Evaluation and Monitoring of Public Policies and Programmes, although this remains only partially operational almost 10 years later.

It is our assessment that VOPES have made great progress in the promotion of evaluation, but they are still having difficulty establishing themselves firmly and achieving sufficient capacities to significantly contribute to and influence the way national evaluation systems are developing. Our analysis is supported by Karkara (2013), who argues that VOPEs require capacity to develop effective policy advocacy strategies, including finding ways to mobilise resources for advocacy. M&E practitioners often rely on simply arguing that doing M&E and building M&E systems are a 'good thing' with intrinsic value. Results-based management, adaptive management, or other ways of using M&E information are often presented, sometimes uncritically, as proffering a panacea for improving government performance. Weak advocacy arguments of this kind are unpersuasive to governments facing real delivery constraints and public pressure to deliver services and achieve development outcomes (Amisi & Chirau, 2018; Mackay, 2007). VOPEs need to sharpen their advocacy strategies and messages to effectively advocate for increased government investment in monitoring and evaluation. At the same time, they need to work with CSOs and development partners as members/stakeholders within country M&E ecosystems, and not regard these only as funders or sources of membership. VOPEs also need to improve their strategies to demonstrate the value of M&E as a public good, and to clearly

indicate the ways in which society can make use of M&E evidence to hold institutions accountable and, ultimately, improve governance.

4.2.5 Strengthening the use/influence of evaluation evidence

It is difficult to determine the extent to which the work of VOPEs encourages the use of, not only the demand (commissioning) for, monitoring and evaluation evidence. During the workshop, some of the participants suggested that governments' sentiments towards CSOs remain relatively negative. There is lack of trust between governments and CSOs, of which VOPEs are part. This has limited the extent to which VOPEs can advocate for more accountability and use of evaluation while simultaneously partnering with government and seeking to access funding from government. In cases where the countries are more open to the input of civil society and there is a mature democracy, VOPEs are better positioned to influence the use of evaluation evidence. A good example is GMEF which has been able to straddle the sector policy and M&E system divide and has, for example, convened conversations about the use of sectoral M&E data in the sanitation sector. Recently, GMEF partnered with IDinsight and CLEAR-AA to host a webinar showcasing the use of CSO monitoring data in the sanitation sector. This is a good example of how the VOPE used the work done by members to convene policy relevant discussions.

Demonstrating the value of monitoring and evaluation evidence for policy and development is articulated as a goal by VOPEs including ZaMEA, TanEA and ESK. However, exactly what this means and the role the VOPEs aim to fulfil remains unclear. There is a limit to what VOPEs can do to strengthen the use of monitoring and evaluation evidence because of the capacity limitations that VOPEs face, but also as a result of policy-related discussions happening at sector level where VOPEs rarely participate, though their members might participate. Nonetheless, it remains important for VOPEs to advocate for monitoring and evaluation evidence to be used in order to demonstrate how the use of evidence offers widespread benefits for organisations and communities.

4.3. Important partnerships for VOPEs

Crucial to VOPEs' success is the formation of collaborative relationships with other organisations with similar objectives and common goals. We reviewed partnerships that VOPEs are establishing and how these are functioning within the various countries' M&E ecosystems. We focused on partnerships with government, development partners and other VOPEs.

4.3.1 Partnership with government

A sound government-VOPE relationship is important for a variety of reasons. Firstly, government regulates all organisations operating within its jurisdiction. The first important relationship between VOPE and government is regulatory one. Most VOPEs we reviewed are legally registered entities complying with the legislative requirements of their countries. Official recognition by government was mentioned by respondents from Senegal, Zimbabwe and Namibia as being an important milestone in the development of their respective VOPEs. This recognition distinguishes loose, informal networks from formalised professional associations, even if the association is voluntary. Secondly, once a VOPE is established, it forms a partnership with government to promote M&E within government and the country. This is achieved by participating in government evaluation processes and promoting the development of policies, etc. In both instances, some recognition by government bolsters the association's legitimacy and credibility with other partners.

Most VOPEs are working closely with the ministries of M&E, or the government entities coordinating M&E in their country. For example, UEA works closely with the Directorate of M&E in the Prime Minister's Office. UEA's work with government is strengthened by having government staff in the management committee, as indicated by a participant in the workshop who said: "***In Uganda we have representation of government officials [in the VOPE], this gives us access to government***". GMEF has established relationships with the Ministry of M&E in Ghana. TanEA is establishing relationships with the President's Office-Public Service Management and Good Governance (PO-PSMGG). At the beginning of 2020, this partnership was evidenced

when government signed a two-year partnership with CLEAR-AA aimed at strengthening the government's monitoring and evaluation system to benefit the wider M&E ecosystem of the United Republic of Tanzania, one of the activities that included TanEA. SenEval has also established relationships with the Senegalese government. For the past few years, the VOPE has been provided with office space by the government of Senegal. This is an important gesture and gives the VOPE credibility, stability, and offers important practical advantages.

Partnership with government gives VOPEs legitimacy and visibility, and also provides VOPEs with access to the government system. However, partnership with government requires management. The partnership should be mutually beneficial, producing net value for both partners. Care needs to be taken for government not to become the authority figure or dominate the affairs of the VOPE as the VOPE has the duty to represent professionals in other sectors. Also, a relationship with government that is too close might make it difficult for the VOPE to hold government accountable and demand more robust analysis of governmental policies.

4.3.2 Partnership with development partners

Development partners are important stakeholders with whom VOPEs are collaborating. Seven development partners were repeatedly mentioned by VOPEs (on websites, reports, workshop discussions and interviews) as being partners (as shown in Figure 6 below). In the figure, UNICEF's bubble is bigger than the others because it is the more frequently mentioned but it is also the most involved in VOPE activities. This was followed by UNDP, which has also played a significant role in shaping M&E in different countries.

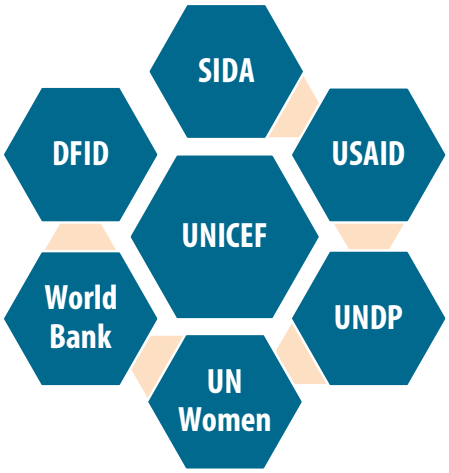


Figure 6: Main development partners working with VOPEs

Both UNICEF and UNDP have been instrumental in the genesis of several VOPEs. For example, the Nairobi M&E network was initiated by the M&E Officer of the UNICEF Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa in 1997. This group held about 50 meetings over a three-year period. The meetings took place on UN premises and participants were from a range of UN Agencies and NGOs, the University of Nairobi, and sometimes from various government departments and donors. The Niger M&E network (ReNSE – Réseau Nigérien de Suivi et Evaluation) was initiated by the UNICEF M&E Office based in Niger (Segone et al., 2006). Similar experiences are reported in Zimbabwe and Senegal, where UNICEF and UNDP have been critical in the initial processes of establishing the countries' associations.

The role of development partners in VOPEs includes:

- Organising some of the earlier discussions about formalisation of existing loose networks in the countries;
- Funding activities such as trainings, workshops, and conferences;
- Supporting VOPEs in specific interventions such as gender-responsive evaluation; inclusive evaluations etc.;
- Providing office accommodation for the VOPE; and
- Covering the costs of the secretariat for a limited time frame.

The influence of development partners has extended to M&E practices and approaches in different countries. Cloete (2016) argues that highly influential practitioners educated in the western academic evaluation paradigm have been influential in developing evaluation practice and systems of international agencies. These systems are often applied in African countries in government and NGOs as requirements for funding. They prescribe approaches, practices and even evaluation practitioners and consultancies from the donor countries or agencies concerned (Cloete, 2016). Through this process, much of how M&E is understood and practiced is shaped by development partners, though this is changing slightly with the advent of regional capacity-building agencies on the continent.

The partnership with development partners is important for VOPEs because development partners work in parallel with government partners. Through bilateral and statutory agreements, development partners have access to ministries that VOPEs do not have access to. They simultaneously support the VOPE and build the infrastructure for M&E within government. This was the case in Zimbabwe where UNICEF worked with VOPE leadership to strengthen the VOPE systems and operation, while at the same time supporting the government's M&E agenda. This created favourable conditions that enabled the progress ZEA was able to make, as mentioned earlier in this report. For the past three years UNICEF has partnered with CLEAR-AA to provide training and develop tools to help African governments use evaluation evidence in reporting against Sustainable Development Goals. This initiative stimulates governments to think about evaluation evidence and demonstrates how evaluative evidence can be used. It also creates opportunities for VOPEs to support Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes, which tend to be led by statistical offices which make little use evaluative evidence.

Because of how M&E evolved on the continent, international development partners have immense influence on national M&E ecosystems due to the various countries' reliance on international donor funding for development and access to advanced M&E systems and internationally renowned M&E experts. However, the power of international development agencies is increasingly being counterbalanced by a growing cohort of regional capacity-building agencies that have actively advocated for Africa-rooted evaluation practice.

Regional partners frequently mentioned by VOPEs include CLEAR-AA, CLEAR-FA, African Capacity Building Foundation, and the African Leadership Initiative. In Uganda and Ghana, Twende Mbele is also mentioned as an influential collaborator. The role of these partners is slightly different from that of international development partners which tend to focus on funding and sponsorship of activities. While regional partners are also reported to have funded activities, their partnerships have chiefly been operational and involved. Regional partners are reported to have partnered with VOPEs in the delivery of training, including the design and delivery of training, delivery of webinars, etc. CLEAR-AA is mentioned as a delivery partner in several trainings in Tanzania, Ghana, and Uganda. Although Twende Mbele mainly works with government partners, the programme has collaborated with GMEF in several activities.

The growing influence of regional partners is an important development on the continent and is indicative of growing M&E capacity in Africa. Although the origin of much of the funding of the activities remains the Global North, the shift towards using capacity development institutions on the African continent can only be beneficial in the long run. It offers opportunities to structure M&E practice and capacity-building approaches that are responsive to the context of the different countries and VOPEs. As more work is done by practitioners on the continent this will strengthen networks between practitioners in different countries and encourage collective reflection and learning on what works within the African context. Moreover, having stronger African evaluation units can only strengthen the mandate of AfrEA and provide the continental body with credible who are working towards similar objectives. The role of regional capacity development institutions appears to be invaluable to national VOPEs.

4.3.3 Working with AFREA

Since 1999 AfrEA has provided space for those interested in the development of M&E in Africa to share and learn from each other. AfrEA has also represented the interests of African practitioners and VOPEs in international platforms such as IDEAS, EvalPartners and IOEC. AfrEA is a key stakeholder in Africa's M&E ecosystem, having supported professionalisation of M&E, growth of VOPEs and, more recently, the indigenisation of evaluation through the strong focus on the 'Made in Africa' evaluation work.

AfrEA's objectives are articulated as follows:

- Supporting evaluations that contribute to real and sustained development in Africa;
- Promoting Africa-rooted and Africa-led evaluation through sharing African evaluation perspectives;
- Encouraging the development and documentation of high-quality evaluation practice and theory;
- Supporting the establishment and growth of national evaluation associations and special evaluation interest groups; and
- Facilitating capacity building, networking and sharing of evaluation theories, techniques and tools among evaluators, policymakers, researchers and development specialists.

Examination of the three strategic objectives of AfrEA 2016-2021 demonstrates that a number of activity areas interface with the work of national VOPEs. Here we expand on those that are directly related to the work that AfrEA does to support national VOPEs. AfrEA's strategic goal 2 is to support African evaluation capacity. To achieve this goal, activity area 4 is to build the institutional capacity of VOPE members. Through activity area 5 AfrEA intends to build the evaluation capacity of VOPE members through targeted projects and programmes.

Some of the work AfrEA has done to support VOPEs includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- **Professional training through standalone courses** on various M&E topics and the biennial conference;
- **Supporting peer-to-peer learning on strengthening internal governance.** As covered in previous sections, this is a stream of work-facilitated exchanges between GMEF and ZEA, ESK and TanEA, and between UEA and Réseau National de Evaluateurs du Burundi (RNEB). These peer-to-peer exchanges included two VOPEs sharing their experiences on the nature of the work they do, governance, management and administration, and financial management, amongst others. The learning exchanges were followed by coaching visits by the mentor VOPE to the mentee. These exchanges have been crucial to enable VOPEs to learn and build from each other's experiences on the continent, despite their limited reach.
- **Defining Africa-rooted frameworks.** In 2002 AfrEA published the 'African Evaluation Guidelines' in the journal *Evaluation and Programme Planning*. In 2020 AfrEA issued a revised version for discussion. These tools are designed with the objective of articulating evaluation practice as it is implemented in Africa. In addition, in 2019 AfreA partnered with the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) on a process to support the growth of the 'Made in Africa

Evaluation' (MAE). TanEA and CaDEA are currently implementing the project. Three other VOPEs will be selected to receive funding to work on MAE. AfrEA has also partnered with CLEAR-AA and UEA in developing a Masters course in Evaluation at the Makerere University. This is an important development in the professional growth of evaluation and the indigenisation process, provided that the master's degree can offer a curriculum rooted in an understanding of the socio-political, economic and cultural context of African countries.

- **Supporting gender-responsive evaluation**. In 2002 the African Gender and Development Evaluator's network was formed as a special interest group of AfrEA. The network has grown to include at least 100 members operating in different countries and has implemented several projects.
- **Addressing governance issues in member VOPEs**. As mentioned previously, AfrEA has assisted VOPEs to resolve the governance issues they face, including the cases of Kenya and Cote d'Ivoire.

All the VOPEs reviewed are registered/recognised by AfrEA. The recognition or registration with AfrEA has symbolic value to VOPEs, provides credibility and enables a sense of connectedness to what is happening on the continent. The AfrEA biennial conference was mentioned as being an important event in the calendars of VOPEs in Africa during which there were opportunities to network with global and regional M&E experts, and also to learn about new developments in the field, as shown in the quote below:

> *"We've also been quite energetic in attending international meetings, I really have bene quite impressed at the last couple of AfrEA conferences in Abidjan, and I think before that, in Kampala … and I tell you I don't know how we managed it but one or way or another, there were twenty or thirty Senegalese there, presenting, and many of them were young … with a significant representation of women." – **KII SenEval***

At the workshop it became apparent that VOPEs require support from AfrEA over and above the help that is already being provided. Further help is needed in terms of:

- Interventions to strengthen governance in VOPEs;
- Support with building a conducive environment in situations where governments lack interest in M&E or accountability; and
- Support with the implementation of M&E activities in countries.

As is the case with national VOPEs in Africa, AfrEA faces its own capacity challenges. These include financial constraints, inadequate IT systems for reaching out to all members, and maintaining an up-to-date database of VOPE activities. AfrEA faces the challenge of overseeing all the work in Africa with an under-resourced secretariat consisting of only two staff members. The eight-member board works on an almost full-time volunteer basis to deliver activities. According to AfrEA, there have been no resources to invest in building the technical and financial capacity of the secretariat. Consequently, the AfrEA Board and secretariat struggle to keep abreast with emerging trends in evaluation and to communicate consistently with its members. For example, several VOPEs raised concerns that, other than the conference, they have limited interaction with AfrEA and that the regional representatives at AfrEA have no ongoing engagement with the national VOPEs that they represent. AfrEA's capacity to effectively coordinate all the VOPE activities on the continent and to advocate for evaluation capacity development is constrained. Nonetheless, AfrEA remains an important institution connecting Africa to the rest of the global evaluation (M&E) ecosystem.

4.3.4 Partnership with other VOPEs

VOPEs are not homogenous and have different areas in which they excel. VOPEs are taking opportunities to learn from each other. For example, in 2017 ZEA sent a delegation to GMEF to learn from the work that GMEF was doing. This was followed by another exchange with ESK on membership management. ZEA also reached out to SAMEA to learn how the latter was managing members, and to seek information on the costs and functionality of the system that SAMEA was using. ZEA participated in the 2019 SAMEA conference and before the COVID-19 pandemic, ZEA had extended an invitation to SAMEA leadership to participate in the

2020 Zimbabwe Evaluation Week. Although NES is still in its developmental stage, the participants from NES indicated that they had drawn immense value from learning from other VOPEs. The southern African VOPEs have also formed a network and the chairpersons of the VOPEs in South Africa, Namibia and Zambia are connecting on WhatsApp to share experiences and resolve issues they face. SenEval also mentioned the importance of learning from other VOPEs; they have been trying to establish formal partnerships with the American Evaluation Association and other VOPEs. The Francophone VOPEs are also collaborating through the Francophone Network of Evaluation (RFE).

Although most of the peer-to-peer learning has occurred without external facilitation or funding, some peer-to-peer interventions do require funding. UNICEF, EvalPartners and AfrEA have been critical in funding peer-to-peer exchanges between VOPEs. More VOPE-to-VOPE interactions need to be facilitated to encourage sharing of experiences and thereby enable mutual learning.

4.3.5 Important role of international evaluation partners

EvalPartners and IOCE were regularly mentioned and listed as key partners for VOPEs. The 2015 International Year of Evaluation campaign was regarded as valuable and important as it offered VOPEs a legitimate platform to convene other stakeholders. EvalPartners' support has advanced peer-to-peer exchanges and learning. Though VOPEs mention IOCE, the extent to which they are tapping into the free resources available, such as the VOPE toolkit, seems to be limited. Nonetheless, it is clear from the analysis that international evaluation networks have created an enabling environment and give impetus to VOPEs.

4.4. Key challenges VOPEs face

The growth of M&E on the continent is indisputable. Governments are increasingly investing in infrastructure for M&E, including M&E ministries/directorates and establishing units in ministries/MDAs etc. Courses on various aspects of M&E are also taught at institutions of higher learning. The role of VOPEs in this development cannot be understated. However, VOPEs still find it difficult to fully convene the M&E stakeholders and systematically drive the M&E agenda in their respective countries. This section expands on some of the major challenges that VOPEs face. The challenges are classified as either internal challenges relating to VOPEs themselves or as external challenges which relate to the external environment.

4.4.1 Internal challenges

- ***Organisational capacity***

VOPEs face several organisational weaknesses. The first challenge concerns the building of professional organisations, and establishing systems and procedures. Most of the VOPEs have performed well in this regard, having constitutions that define how elections will be done, and articulating the roles and responsibilities of the governing bodies (boards/executive committees). Where VOPEs still experience difficulty is in the lack of systems for effective financial management, internal policies, membership management, and marketing/communication, etc.

The second challenge concerns either the absence or inadequacy of administrative capacity of VOPEs. The role of an administrator should not be underestimated as competent administration is one of the key elements associated with high workplace productivity and efficiency. An administrator coordinates office activities and operations to ensure efficiency and compliance with company policies; manages agendas and appointments for the board; coordinates activities of the management committee/board; manages phone calls and correspondence with members; manages membership; and supports budgeting and bookkeeping procedures, amongst others. It is very difficult to run an organisation without good administrative capacity.

Most VOPEs are not able to afford to establish a formal secretariat or to employ a full-time administrator. This puts significant strain on the volunteer board members to carry the responsibilities of the day-to-day management of the organisation in addition to having their own full-time employment. Moreover, the

absence of full-time administrators who outlive the terms of the temporary board members/executive committees compromises continuity and creates a start-stop cycle in the VOPE lifecycle as there is limited institutional memory carry over.

The absence of administrative staff also makes the implementation of projects onerous for volunteer management committees. The lack of administrative support is felt acutely when VOPEs are donor funded and need to comply with the reporting requirements of donors. This hampers VOPEs from thinking strategically about the direction M&E is taking in their countries and acting effectively as a convener and enabler of changes within the wider system.

■ *Limits to reliance on volunteers*

The issue of capacity limitations experienced by VOPEs was addressed earlier. What is important to emphasise here is the real constraints that most VOPEs face due to a narrow volunteer base. This point was raised by two participants in the workshop. Their comments were:

> *"Because VOPEs activities are voluntary so it's not easy to sustain activities and there are renewable membership - this is also a challenge that VOPEs face daily. Also, VOPEs can get funds to implement their activities - because memberships are not enough to cover activities"* – ***Workshop participant***

> *"In Namibia - the concept of M&E is emerging and professionals are not a lot – hardly time to volunteer to do VOPE work most people are doing other things such as consultancy"*
> – ***Workshop participant***

As the last comment notes, it is not that practitioners do not want to volunteer to implement or lead activities. On the contrary, practitioners may be keen to assist but as they are likely to be consulting and carrying their own significant workloads, it is difficult for them to take on additional volunteer work. Two participants indicated that at busy times they could be spending as much as 2-3 days per week on VOPE work. For practitioners who are dependent on consulting income, this can be difficult to sustain.

It is unlikely that additional capacity is going to be made available to VOPEs. VOPEs will need to be innovative to enable maximum efficiency within the bounds of their existing capacity limitations. SenEval's example is demonstrative of how VOPEs can reduce expectations, exploit partnerships, use legacy board members, etc., to deliver on the VOPE agenda.

■ *Limited revenue sources*

The lack of resources is a perennial challenge for VOPEs and, as mentioned above, it is not unique to VOPEs in Africa. Across the globe, associations have relied on revenue from conferences and capacity-building workshops. Even then, conferences and workshops can only be profitable when there is sponsorship from partners to reduce the input costs of such events. The success of the conference/workshop model also relies on members being able to pay a fee to attend the events. This may place financial constraints on members as M&E is a growing field and most members are consultants in developing countries without full-time employment or consistent work opportunities. This is the case of VOPEs in Africa which cannot charge high fees for their activities as they will become unaffordable for the majority of the membership base. This exclusionary outcome is undesirable as the profession is still in its nascent phase.

Another source of revenue is membership fees. Membership-based organisations rely on membership fees to cover overhead costs. The VOPEs reviewed have kept fees inexpensive so that costs are not a barrier to membership for individuals and institutions. For example, ZEA charges $20 for individual members, $10 for students and $180 for institutions. With about 150 paying members, these fees are inadequate to cover operational costs and the cost of paying for an administrator. UEA charges an annual subscription

fee and once-off registration fee. For individuals this amounts to $53.80 and annual subscription of $26.90. For institutions, UEA charges $538.00 per organisation with annual fees of $403.50. In SenEval about 100 members generally pay their membership fee, and with the income from the membership fees the VOPE is able to raise around $5000 or $6000 which has been enough to cover their minimum operational costs, including affiliating fees. However, this leaves the association with limited resources for other activities. Much research into the affairs of VOPEs has identified the common challenge of financial resources. As public benefit organisations, VOPEs are limited in the range of activities permitted to raise revenue.

Development partners have been an important source of project funding for VOPEs. They have an interest in improving accountability and strengthening policy implementation mechanisms in various countries. However, donor funding comes at a cost to VOPEs. Considering that many VOPEs do not have full time administrators, executive management teams must bear the responsibility of compliance with donor funding reporting requirements. Also, donors are more likely to fund specific projects with stipulated outputs and outcomes. They are less likely to be interested in the long-term work of building a profession, developing tools and guidance, and engaging with academia, etc. A point was raised by a representative from ZEA at the workshop:

> *"I have found that the resource or finance situation is limiting. VOPEs have limited capability to run projects. ZEA is supported by UNICEF but there are challenges such as the agenda of the VOPE is never clear. We need funds to move out of the project mode because your capacity and advocacy almost dies. It is good to have money but it shouldn't limit VOPE."* – ***Workshop participant***

The resource limitations experienced by VOPEs have compelled them to adopt a project delivery model, where they implement activities or deliver projects in order to generate revenue. This model is capacity intensive and offers minimal returns. As a result, VOPEs are occupied with implementing projects and activities, and their management committees/boards are unable to focus on driving strategic vision for M&E in their countries.

■ *Developing a business model*

Most VOPEs have done well in instituting formal planning by developing strategic plans and, in some cases, annual plans. However, VOPE capacity to develop strategy for M&E in the respective countries remains limited. Strategy, in this sense, does not refer to the development of plans or the delivery of activities, which VOPEs have done quite well. Challenges remain in terms of VOPEs fully understanding and articulating their respective business models; understanding the VOPE's place in the wider ecosystem – including understanding competitors, collaborators and partners – understanding organisational strength; being able to deliver on strategy; and remaining responsive to an evolving context. A clear strategy will serve to identify the stakeholders or clients of the VOPE's work, their needs and resources, and how their needs can be met. For example, in most countries Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have developed strong evaluation capacity and have their own networks which enable sharing amongst themselves and link them to local, national, regional, and international entities. In addition, institutions have partnerships and networks which are frequently based on a discipline, a sector, or a particular topic of interest. They support publications, foster knowledge building in evaluation and enhance methodological rigor (Quesnel, 2006). However, VOPEs have not used their organisational strength effectively as conveners and representatives of M&E practitioners in these different sectors to systematically drive the M&E agenda.

Linked to this is the centrality of leadership. Kriel (2006) found that the quality of leadership is a key determinant of the success of an organisation. When a leader changes, a VOPE can struggle to recalibrate. Most VOPE chairpersons do not serve for longer than two years. This creates a degree of volatility and instability, particularly because changes in leadership are also linked to changes within the management committees/boards and, in the absence of an administrator, changes can lead to discontinuation of earlier activities or a dip in momentum as partnerships are re-established.

4.4.2 External challenges and threats

■ ***Threat of co-optation by dominant parties***

VOPEs need partners and as previously mentioned, it is highly likely that partners will have more capacity and resources than the VOPE. This represents a real threat that VOPEs will compromise their independence for the benefits gained by serving dominant partners. Dominant partners can usurp the authority of a VOPE thereby appropriating the country's professionalisation agenda or diverting the attention of the VOPE to serving their purpose. This is a fear that a representative at the workshop expressed:

> *"Advocacy needs an independent voice, can't be possible if VOPE is too dependent on government… trying to establish an independent VOPE not one associated with government."*
> ***– VOPE representative at the workshop***

Fears of domination were also expressed in South Africa where the close relationship between the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation was perceived by other stakeholders as a threat to the independence of the VOPE. Despite positive spin-offs flowing from this partnership, some still argue that balancing representation of the DPME and the public service on the SAMEA Board is a threat to the independence of SAMEA. Stakeholders argued that the DPME may dominate and that SAMEA runs the risk of becoming an extension of the DPME, thereby diminishing SAMEA's own identity (Beney et al., 2015).

When the agenda of an association is appropriated, the association may inadvertently neglect to respond to the needs of their diverse membership and narrowly concentrate on serving the dominant stakeholder. This can happen unintentionally on the part of both the dominant partner and the VOPE. For example, Ali and Asiimwe (2018) found that while the UEA developed and promoted the guidelines that shaped evaluation in Uganda, the government's needs actually dominated how the guidelines were defined. As a result, though it was a positive development that government showed interest in VOPE-developed guidelines, the boundary between the VOPE and government was blurred, and the evaluation guidelines focused mainly on evaluation practice in the public sector and paid scant attention to the role of CSOs. Therefore, CSOs are not widely referenced or popularised in evaluation matters, and their influence on evaluation practice in Uganda is somewhat impeded.

This finding indicates that relationships with key partners require careful management or VOPEs risk being appropriated or their independence diminished – both of which are undesirable outcomes.

■ ***Minimal political clout***

VOPEs' ability to influence policy makers and development practitioners remains restricted. VOPEs have been less than successful in ensuring government accountability towards its citizens. For example, the close collaboration with UEA has not necessarily increased government sharing of information with non-governmental actors. In fact, Ali and Asiimwe (2018) report that government remains hesitant to share data, particularly with non-state stakeholders such as civil society. In Ghana, GMEF has had relative success in ensuring accountability. However, this could be because of the history of openness to civil society by government in that country.

Similarly, VOPEs have had limited success in shaping evaluation practice of development partners operating in their countries. There is a power imbalance between international development partners who are often the main commissioners of evaluation and VOPEs (Holvoet et al., 2011), as they tend to rely on their own guidelines and standards for evaluation and sometimes do not use local professionals. Even research work in public universities is conducted with donor funding or in collaboration with other external universities who tend to dictate the research focus, which may not necessarily be consistent with national research priorities (Adams et al., 2013). VOPEs have had limited success in ensuring that the M&E generated by development partners supports accountability to beneficiaries and ultimately forms part of the learning agenda of each country.

In reality, VOPEs have not successfully crafted a clear advocacy message as to why society should care whether programmes are monitored and evaluated or not. They have not been able to mobilise broader public opinion, partly because there has been minimal collaboration and partnership with some of the policy advocacy NGOs and parliament. VOPEs have tended to find mutual partnerships with other organisations in M&E, even within government they have had more successes partnering with M&E units.

"We need economic bodies (SADC, etc.) to come on board and support. We need to do advocacy with them and for them to see VOPEs as legitimate and add VOPEs in their work. We have our own economic bodies (mentions SADC, AU) … Regional bodies can support pushing government to evaluate programmes." – ***Participant***

Previous research also found that ZaMEA has yet to tap into some of its potential to drive the M&E agenda in Zambia (Kanyamuna, 2019).

Despite the impressive progress that VOPEs have made, much still needs to be done to bolster the political influence of national VOPEs. Progress with strengthening the quality of M&E and demonstration of the value it creates for policy actors will go a long way to improve VOPEs' influence. So would a clear strategy and judicious utilisation of collaborative partnerships.

5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this report was to provide a discussion paper to inform the work of CLEAR-AA and AfrEA to support VOPEs to effectively play their role in strengthening national M&E capacity. The document is limited by its reliance on secondary data and minimal primary data collection. Gaps in information have been addressed through extensive triangulation using a variety of data sources and literature. The conclusion has three parts: (1) Drawing main themes from the paper. This is organised by five questions that guided the discussion paper; (2) Reflecting on VOPEs in the M&E ecosystem. This section aims to locate VOPEs within the M&E ecosystem beyond the focus on representation of professionals' interests; and (3) Considerations of how challenges VOPEs can be addressed. This section offers recommendations for CLEAR-AA and AfrEA to consider.

5.1. Main themes from the paper

5.1.1 Status of VOPEs

VOPEs take different forms and sizes. While all are incorporated as not-for profit organisations, they differ in capacity and size of membership. While membership of most VOPEs has grown with time, the number of members who consistently renew their membership has remained consistent. VOPEs' membership is also varied, including commissioners of evaluation, monitoring, and data specialists, amongst others. Responding to the needs of varied membership has its challenges. Most VOPEs are instituted with formal constitutions, regular meetings of governing bodies are held, and the VOPEs are affiliated with AfrEA. Some challenges still remain in the continuity and sustainability of efforts. VOPEs experience perennial capacity and resource limitations. Though these are challenges shared by other voluntary organisations, VOPEs could address these more effectively by means of clarity of strategy, improved articulation of the business model, improvements in their value proposition, and innovation in resource mobilisation and management.

5.1.2 Primary objectives

VOPEs have articulated a broad set of objectives, including building a community of practice, strengthening capacity of members, professionalisation of evaluation, and creating space for networking. VOPEs have done relatively well in the building of members capacity by offering specialised training, capacity building workshops, and hosting M&E weeks/conferences. Drawing on the work being done internationally and at AfrEA, national VOPEs have also engaged in activities to strengthen quality of evaluation, though to a limited extent. There is scope for VOPEs to better articulate their public benefit objectives beyond the capability building and the professionalisation agendas. More needs to be done to demonstrate how the existence of a VOPE benefits society in order to justify the use of resources to strengthen the organisations, particularly in view of the current COVID-19 pandemic when budgets for service delivery are constrained with less funding being available due to the necessity of meeting the health and social consequences of the pandemic. To demonstrate the value of VOPE work, the associations might need to rethink their strategies and focus (a point we return to in the next sub-section), particularly VOPEs that have been in existence for some time.

5.1.3 Roles VOPEs are playing in countries' M&E ecosystems

The role a national VOPE plays in its country's M&E ecosystem depends largely on the point at which it is in its development. VOPEs which are in the process of being established are most likely to focus on bringing practitioners together and creating a network. Once a network is established the focus might shift to formalising the organisation, building a membership base, building members' capacity, and establishing partners. As the national VOPE matures it might start focusing on shaping the environment and grappling with its place in the development agenda. There is evidence that when VOPEs focus beyond the point of institutional development this can be regarded as the VOPE becoming increasingly influential in activities aimed at strengthening the use of monitoring and evaluation evidence, and in promoting the development of M&E policies by government, amongst others. There are examples of VOPEs working with parliaments to

raise awareness about M&E, thereby supporting policy development by government. This is an emerging area of work and challenges remain regarding VOPEs capacity to meet the needs of policymakers for substantive inputs and, at times, the political environment constrains the advocacy role of the VOPEs. Nonetheless, it is a promising development and represents the type of work VOPEs should strategically consider.

5.1.4 Enabling factors and barriers for VOPEs

National VOPEs face several challenges. Some of the challenges are internal relating to administrative capacity, financial resource limitation, and constrained volunteer base. Other challenges are imposed on VOPEs by the socio-political environment within which they operate. When government is open to civil society engagement and partnership, there is more scope for VOPEs to grow and do impactful work. The opposite is true of an environment that constrains civil liberties. Also, much of the M&E work that is undertaken on the African continent is funded by international donors that often insist on consultancy which makes use of the donors' M&E frameworks and systems. This potentially limits the extent to which national VOPEs can truly drive indigenisation and innovation in M&E practice, this is not to say that innovation is not happening but serves to highlight the constraints that exist and need to be considered.

5.1.5 Networks and synergies

The M&E environment is expanding with new institutions emerging and offering potential partnerships to VOPEs. National VOPEs have formed important partnerships with international and regional development partners such as UNICEF, UNDP, UNWOMEN, Africa Development Bank, amongst others. These agencies have supported much of the activities implemented by VOPEs by sponsoring conferences, providing funding for training and, in some cases, providing ongoing technical assistance to the national VOPE. AfrEA is also recognised as an important partner, and affiliation with AfrEA offers the VOPE some legitimacy and access to opportunities offered by AfrEA and international partners. CLEAR-AA, Twende Mbele, and ACBF also emerged as being important institutions in the ecosystem by funding workshops, conferences, and other activities. Encouragingly, VOPEs are initiating peer-to-peer contact and facilitating their own learning and growth. Some peer-to-peer learning has been funded by AfrEA and international partners like EvalPartners but other peer-to-peer learning opportunities have been initiated by VOPEs. It is clear that while national VOPEs are not completely isolated and do form part of a larger network, there is room for improvement and relationships can be established with other institutions in the national and global M&E ecosystems. The existing networks and connections have enabled VOPEs to grow despite the challenges they face.

It is clear from the review that VOPEs remain an important element in national M&E ecosystems and are important enablers of national capacity development efforts. They occupy a unique position in civil society and represent professionals who come from a variety of sectors. VOPEs also have the potential to shape M&E practice and raise awareness on the importance of M&E amongst the broader public. However, issues of constrained capacity, inadequate technology, and limited financial resources continue to be barriers for VOPEs' optimal functioning. Some VOPEs are finding innovative ways to address their capacity needs, to learn from others, and to work with partners. While the environment in most countries is favourable for M&E practice, certain countries have regressed in terms of accountability and openness to civil society. These are material constraints to the ability of VOPEs to ensure M&E is used as a tool to ensure good governance and improve the performance of policies and programmes. There is no doubt that strengthened associations are critical to sustainable M&E capacity development. Therefore, it is important that solutions are found to the challenges that vex VOPEs. The next part of the conclusion explores how some of the challenges VOPE face can be addressed.

5.2 Reconsidering VOPEs in the countries' M&E ecosystems

This sub-section attempts to conceptually revisit the question of the purpose of VOPEs and their importance in the discussions surrounding monitoring and evaluation evidence, after which the challenges facing VOPEs will be addressed.

VOPEs are essentially public benefit organisations and they exist to address a need in society. According to

the literature and several case studies, VOPEs have the potential to play a key role in terms of addressing the enabling environment for monitoring and evaluation. The following five important functions of VOPEs are elaborated upon:

5.2.1 Custodianship over the country's M&E ecosystem

In different contexts, it is often unclear who should take custodianship of the M&E sector. Is this the role of government or the role of the VOPE? Or is it a role they equally share? Discussions about role of VOPEs either explicitly or implicitly infer the need for government to support associations if they are to thrive and grow. Indeed, associations themselves have sought to attain some partnership with government. This relationship with government is important because it gives the association legitimacy in terms of recognition and because it is seen to be working with government. The relationship with government is complicated because on one level government is a regulator which gives VOPEs the 'right' to exist yet, as government is responsible for equitable distribution of resources in society, and on another level, VOPEs, as civil society institutions have the responsibility to ensure that government remains accountable. Therefore, VOPEs should avoid becoming an extension of government or being wholly dependent on government, but should rather seek a symbiotic relationship.

To promote M&E approaches and the use of M&E evidence in ways that benefit society, there is a case to be made for VOPEs to take a custodial role in countries' M&E ecosystems. VOPEs should retain interest in M&E as a profession, practice, and discipline; and work with a variety of stakeholders, of which government is one.

Although governments have tended to develop M&E policies in their countries, analysis shows that, as is expected, these policies are limited to guiding the practice of M&E as it applies in the public service. VOPEs should claim their space within the M&E ecosystem to convene all stakeholders interested in M&E, set the normative frameworks for the M&E practice in the country, promote the interest of those who are served by M&E (communities), guide knowledge development, and ensure ethical conduct by professionals in different sectors (government, CSOs, academia, development partners). This multifunctional role cannot be taken on by any other institution.

5.2.2 Representation of collective needs of M&E professionals

An important function of associations is to represent M&E professionals. VOPEs are essential for professionalisation as they provide a collective identity for M&E practitioners and create a normative framework and space for the practice of knowledge generation (Hager, 2014). VOPEs need to engage and strive to meet the need for professional development, networking opportunities, and continuous professional learning for M&E professionals.

A visible or perceptible benefit for members is important for the sustainability of VOPEs. VOPEs need volunteers to help with implementing activities and projects. Studies done by Wang and Ki (2018) suggest that members' perceptions of the needs fulfilment and organisational support they receive from their associations influences members' attitudes toward their association. If members' perceptions are positive, this positively impacts on members' willingness to engage with the association in terms of volunteering and donating funds.

The research found that although VOPEs have done a significant amount of work in this area by creating spaces for networking, and by providing training and other capacity-building opportunities, gaps still remain. With M&E not yet recognised as formal profession, VOPEs are unable to effectively lobby on behalf of professionals in labour-related matters. For example, they are not able to set normative frameworks for grading of professionals or define appropriate compensation scales based on experience and expertise. We conclude that VOPEs will make advances in this aspect if they improve their understanding of their diverse membership and their needs. This requires improvements in membership management systems, regular analysis of membership trends, a survey of members' needs, and regular assessments/reviews of the quality and impact of services that VOPEs are offering.

In addition, VOPEs need to formulate and implement means to protect those served by the M&E professionals they represent. For example, they should devise and enable mechanisms for institutions using M&E professionals to raise concerns around performance or any perceived ethical violation. They should devise affordable and context-relevant mechanisms that can be implemented to ensure ethical conduct amongst M&E practitioners.

5.2.3 Support the building of M&E infrastructure within public service.

The importance of government investment in the institutionalisation of M&E for the growth of the country's M&E ecosystem cannot be overstated. When governments institutionalise M&E through policy, budget allocations, M&E units, etc. it creates the conditions for other institutions in the country to increase their investments. When governments institutionalise M&E, it benefits the work of VOPEs. Therefore, VOPEs should actively lobby government and support efforts towards institutionalisation, without compromising their independence in the process. Indeed, a large number of VOPEs worldwide are beginning to move away from addressing the supply side of M&E – involving the building of capacities of VOPE members to conduct evaluation – towards addressing the demand side, which is "the environment that influences requests for evaluation, including the Terms of Reference shaping what clients are asking evaluators to do" (Rugh, 2014, p. 18).

Case studies of various international VOPEs show the different ways in which VOPEs can significantly influence governments, such as by the formulation of high-level evaluation-related policies, and through the establishment and implementation of national, ministerial and provincial M&E systems. In some countries, VOPE members have promoted evaluation practice within government departments, the Offices of the Premier and cabinets. This was achieved by integrating evaluation processes and procedures within government structures, thereby promoting the value of evaluation in improving programme quality and upgrading the programme standards for both government and not-for-profit service providers. Other VOPEs have supported an enabling environment for evaluation by developing a set of evaluation competencies. The aim of these evaluation competencies is to ensure the broadest possible application, meaning that the purpose of the competencies is not only to enhance knowledge and boost the demand for quality evidence by funders and commissioners of evaluation, but also to build the quality and supply of evaluators to provide the requisite evidence.

In addition to evaluation standards and competencies, research also shows that National Evaluation Frameworks and Evaluation Plans are also key to promoting an enabling environment for evaluation and VOPEs should, therefore be involved in their countries' efforts to develop and implement national evaluation frameworks and plans. VOPEs' participation should not be to simply rubber-stamp government policies but should be that of productive involvement through which VOPEs can advocate on behalf their members and the intended beneficiaries of M&E policies. They should be advocating for more equity-focused, gender-responsive and transformative M&E practice.

One way that VOPEs can do this is by not focusing exclusively on the executive arm of government, but by also working with parliamentarians to increase the demand and use of evaluation in public policy-making processes. While TanEA and ZEA have made some inroads into working with parliament, both reported that there were challenges towards the achievement of the full benefits that this collaboration could potentially offer.

5.2.4 Promote the use of M&E in public management

According to Karkara, (2013), while some VOPEs recognise the need to improve the supply of quality, credible, and useful evaluations; they are also addressing the demand side, which includes advocating that governmental policies and systems implement evaluation standards that ensure accountability, provide opportunities for learning, and support public transparency. VOPEs should play a central role in advocating for transparency in the allocation and expenditure of public budgets; accountability for the implementation of public policies; strengthening the demand and use of evaluation to inform evidence-based policy making;

and strengthening the capacities of qualified evaluators to produce valid, credible and useful evaluations based on national and international evaluation standards. The quality of democracy can be strengthened when informed citizens are able to influence decision making.

Karkara (2013, p. 19-20) identifies several ways in which VOPEs can support an enabling environment for evaluation (such as the development of M&E policies and systems):

- "Advocate for the use of evaluation evidence in policy development and implementation.
- Advocate for development and implementation of national evaluation policies that are equity-focused and gender-responsive.
- Work in partnership with governments and parliamentarians towards the establishment of national evaluation policies.
- Work with governments to set standards as benchmarks which can be used to convince other stakeholders of the importance of the evaluation principles and measures to safeguard them.
- Foster indigenous demand and supply of evaluation.
- Be available to advise commissioners of evaluations on the relevance of Terms of Reference for evaluations, including choices of appropriate design and methodology to answer key questions.
- Promote the capacity of evaluators to perform quality, credible and useful evaluations.
- Conduct independent research, monitoring and evaluation to validate national statistics provided by the authorities.
- Develop tripartite partnerships with the UN system, government and civil society.
- Mobilize resources otherwise not available for the purpose of evaluation from within the national budgets.
- Create evaluation awareness among journalists by engaging media in the process of advocacy for evaluation."

The problem is that many VOPEs continue to face challenges in establishing themselves firmly in countries and in achieving adequate capacities to make significant contributions to, and influence on, the way national evaluation systems are developing. For example, VOPEs explain that they have limited capacity to advocate for equity- and gender-sensitive evaluations and to access additional government funding for monitoring and evaluation. In addition, VOPEs indicate that they require increased skills to create and maintain networks, and to engage with parliamentarians and the media. Further, VOPEs mention that they need more opportunities to learn from other VOPEs' country experiences on the topic of improved knowledge management practices. Furthermore, VOPEs indicate that they require capacity to develop effective policy advocacy strategies, including finding ways in which to mobilise the resources necessary for effective advocacy.

5.2.5 Demonstrate value of M&E

According to Rugh (2014), VOPEs are aware that national governments need to fully appreciate the value of evaluation for their own purposes. However, M&E has often been defined narrowly and confused with other fields such as auditing and research. The benefits that governments and society derive from regular monitoring and evaluation of programmes and policies is not fully understood outside M&E professionals' circles. In addition, the prevailing belief is that most of the tools and methods used in M&E seem to apply post implementation and that they focus on a defined evaluand. This makes it difficult to demonstrate the value of M&E when dealing with complexity. It is, in fact, when governments are faced with complexity that robust M&E is needed the most. Over the years, evaluators have recognised that evaluation tools and approaches require ongoing updating to remain relevant and responsive to users of evaluation evidence (Picciotto, 2019). Tools that evaluators have traditionally used are programme-centric and rely on simple programme results frameworks and theories of change. In recent times, however, post-implementation assessments have come under pressure as information is needed more rapidly. In addition, programme performance is influenced by numerous factors beyond the boundaries of the programmes themselves.

Governments are also having to align with global measurements such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and these measurements are interrelated in unpredictable and uncontrolled ways. Evaluators are increasingly drawing on complexity theories and systems thinking to respond (Schwandt et al., 2017) and using big data in evaluations. Evaluators are increasingly being called upon to focus on transformational change and to not limit their functions to measuring the achievement of programme objectives.

These developments require the profession to expand its efforts from simply answering questions about the effect of programmes on participants, to move into the realm of determining whether interventions are challenging and altering the prevailing embedded unequal power structures that produce poverty and inequality. A failure to clearly demonstrate how evaluation contributes to transformation of unequal societal power structures can limit the interest the public takes in evaluation. Evaluators unable to link their work to an agenda of transformation will struggle to help communities counter the onslaught of fake news, 'alternative truth', and the rise of populist ideas based on misinformation. VOPEs must convincingly demonstrate to policy makers and society the value of monitoring and evaluation evidence in helping countries navigate the complex problems that they face by engaging in some of the policy making activities in their countries, whether through members or direct involvement of the board. For example, VOPEs should be actively participating in countries' SDG reporting processes and promoting the use of M&E evidence in that process. As countries battle to formulate responses to the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, VOPEs need to actively seek out ways to influence these processes.

5.3. How can the challenges VOPEs face be addressed?

For VOPEs to fulfil the abovementioned functions, they need to address the challenges they face. This section looks at how some of the internal and external challenges that VOPEs face could be addressed to enable VOPEs to expand their influence.

5.2.1 Addressing internal challenges

- ***Clarification of strategy***

VOPEs need to articulate their strategy more effectively. As it stands, though planning is showing improvements, VOPEs are focusing more on delivering activities and managing current operations than on long term strategic thinking. VOPEs must, therefore, rethink their business model. The current business model focuses on the delivery of individual training programmes/workshops as well as on conferences. The current project model with its reliance on conferences is capacity intensive. Also, it leads to VOPEs competing with some of their members, while at the same time relying on the same members to provide trainings or workshops voluntarily or at reduced costs to the VOPE. VOPE performance is also being measured on the number of activities that they implement, partly because of accounting for donor funding. However, being effective should not be equated with the number of projects or training workshops delivered, but with the efficacy with which they create enabling conditions for different stakeholders to fulfil their roles in the M&E ecosystem.

Most VOPE strategies can be improved by gaining a clearer comprehension of the needs and objectives of the clients/stakeholders that benefit from M&E, and thereby it can be determined how they can be engaged most effectively. Most literature suggests grouping stakeholders into M&E practitioners, commissioners, policy users, and beneficiaries. For each of these stakeholders, VOPEs need to be clear about the client's particular needs and to provide the VOPE's best value proposition to meet those needs. This can be achieved with a clearer articulation of what VOPEs want to achieve in relation to M&E as a practice, profession and discipline and, by doing so, could open revenue opportunities that are currently unavailable.

The conferences that VOPEs host are extremely important events as they are the means by which VOPEs convene different stakeholders and engage in ongoing conversations about the evolution of M&E in their countries. However, VOPEs need to rethink how they deliver conferences/M&E weeks as part of long-term strategy rather than as a once-off activity.

■ *Improved value proposition and diversification of revenue*

VOPE membership has not seen significant growth despite indications of a growing M&E sector. The number of paid-up members is also lower than the actual membership, with people initially joining VOPEs but then failing to renew their membership. Additionally, the potential number of members far exceeds the actual number of members. This indicates that potential members do not see the value of signing up. To improve their value proposition to members, VOPEs need to improve the following:

- Understand their membership and what they need. This includes knowing who they are, the sector they operate in, the skills they hold, their needs, etc. This needs to be regularly updated;
- Improve membership management – such as sending reminders for renewal and making the payment process user-friendly for ease of payment for joining fees and membership renewals;
- Improve member benefits;
- Articulate what representing practitioners means; and
- Recruit and retain institutional members.

Membership fees are a predictable source of revenue and improved membership management can increase this revenue for VOPEs. Membership fees alone, however, are insufficient for VOPEs to hire administrators and have the necessary funding for strategic projects. VOPEs will still need to seek project funding but they also need to think of innovative projects that can diversify and bolster the revenue stream, but which can also contribute to longer term goals of professionalisation/strengthening M&E practice. For example, VOPEs could be funded to develop guidelines, norms, and standards, etc. and establish capacity to certify M&E courses. This could be a predictable source of revenue for VOPEs. There are other ways that VOPEs can explore to diversify their offering while also generating revenue.

■ *Strengthen internal systems*

VOPEs need to strengthen their organisational management systems. This would include implementing efficient internal financial management policies and financial management systems, and by publicising plans, etc. Here, VOPEs need to learn from each other. Some VOPEs are finding smarter, more affordable and effective ways to manage finances, even with limited resources. AfrEA can also assist with this process, as will be described in the sections that follow.

■ *Capacity challenges*

All VOPEs experience capacity challenges in one form or another. VOPEs experience difficulties with incentivising the broader membership to take on project leadership, and are therefore frequently compelled to rely on a small core group of people. These individuals are at high risk of burnout. It is unlikely that VOPEs will be able to afford to hire staff in the immediate future. There are other ways that VOPEs can alleviate capacity limitations:

- Prepare streamlined annual plans. Instead of annual plans with a litany of activities that are not implemented, VOPEs need to plan realistically. This requires them to focus on inventive activities to achieve maximum impact with minimal effort;
- Innovate to address capacity gaps. Identify core activities that can only be done by elected members, and those that can be done by other members and partners with the guidance and supervision of elected committee members. SenEval, for example, has been innovative in holding workshops led by international partners at no or minimal cost to SenEval;

- Consider having an elected board/executive committee and a non-elected steering committee to assist with implementation of programmes/projects. Where possible, previous board members should remain involved with the VOPE. This could be in an advisory capacity or any other form of recognised institutional arrangement. For example, SenEval has a current chair and honorary chair who provide guidance and a degree of continuity; and
- Develop strategies to incentivise a greater number of members to volunteer. This could include incentives such as awards and other interventions that will recognise members who volunteer their time.

- ***Strengthen incentives for volunteers***

Associations need volunteers who actively engage and co-produce content that enhances their career opportunities and benefits the broader field (Hager, 2014). However, most VOPEs raise concerns that the shortage of volunteers risks volunteer fatigue for the few who are actively engaged. This is an important sustainability issue as with a sustainable supply of actively engaged members, VOPEs can make significant progress in promoting M&E evidence generation and use. It is imperative that VOPEs find innovative ways to incentivise members to volunteer. To do that, they need to understand the engagement motivations and what detracts from the willingness/ability to volunteer in their country contexts. Individuals are motivated by both private and public benefits. Others have argued that reliance on public benefits or simply arguing that actively engaging with the VOPE for the benefit society alone is not enough to motivate individuals to volunteer in associations (Hager, 2014).

5.2.2. How CLEAR-AA and AfrEA can assist VOPEs

Partners have an essential role to play in strengthening VOPEs. There are various principles that partners should observe when supporting VOPEs:

- **Principle 1:** Focus on long term goals; although delivery of short-term projects remains important for the visibility and legitimacy of the VOPE, support should assist VOPEs to focus on long-term goals;
- **Principle 2:** Focus on achieving sustained change; support to strengthen VOPEs should be aligned with building a sustainable organisation, not merely the delivery of activities;
- **Principle 3:** Enable, not take over; partners are likely to have more capacity than VOPEs. The temptation will exist to implement activities on behalf of VOPEs but, although this could achieve short-term goals, it will not build VOPEs' capacity. Where some delivery role for partners is unavoidable, the emphasis should be on co-delivery;
- **Principle 4:** Use local partners; interventions to support VOPEs should draw from local capacity, possibly individuals who are already involved with the VOPEs;
- **Principle 5:** Adopt a systems approach and not just individual activities; in supporting VOPEs, partners must think about the entire country ecosystem and aim to draw connections between disparate activities to avoid further fragmentation or silos. Partners must also co-ordinate their efforts; and
- **Principle 6:** Differentiated approach; VOPEs are not homogenous. Each VOPE should be approached as unique, their positionality and capacity are shaped by political and socio-economic context of their country and history of the organisation. This context must be understood by any partner investing in the VOPE.

Expanding on Principle 6, an important step in strengthening VOPEs is understanding the needs of different VOPEs. There are many ways that VOPEs differ. In pursuit of this understanding, we propose that VOPEs are categorised according to the point at which the VOPE is in its development path and in the M&E context of its country. Three categories are proposed. Category one is emergent VOPEs. These are VOPEs in the formative phases and where the M&E context is emergent. This will include countries such as Namibia, Togo, Mozambique, amongst others. The second category is growing VOPEs. These are VOPEs that have existed for a while and have an established reputation, but have failed to grow consistently and the M&E context is constrained, with minimal government interest in accountability or M&E. It could also include VOPEs that have demonstrated vitality and are growing, but which remain financially dependent despite the country's

M&E context being open and there being demonstrable government interest in M&E. This will include VOPEs such as ESK, ZaMEA, SenEval, amongst others. Category three is established VOPEs. This group consists of established VOPEs that have demonstrated organisational stability and capacity over a period of time. This includes VOPEs such as SAMEA in South Africa, UEA in Uganda, and GMEF in Ghana, amongst others.

Capacity needs can be interpreted as follows (see Figure 7 below):

- Category one – emergent VOPEs. These VOPEs will most likely need assistance with basic questions about how to start, where to start, how they build a membership base, developing systems, etc;
- Category two – growing VOPEs. These VOPEs will most likely need assistance with how to consolidate their work and grow further; and
- Category three – established VOPEs needing support in moving to the next level, keeping their members engaged, driving professionalisation debates, etc.

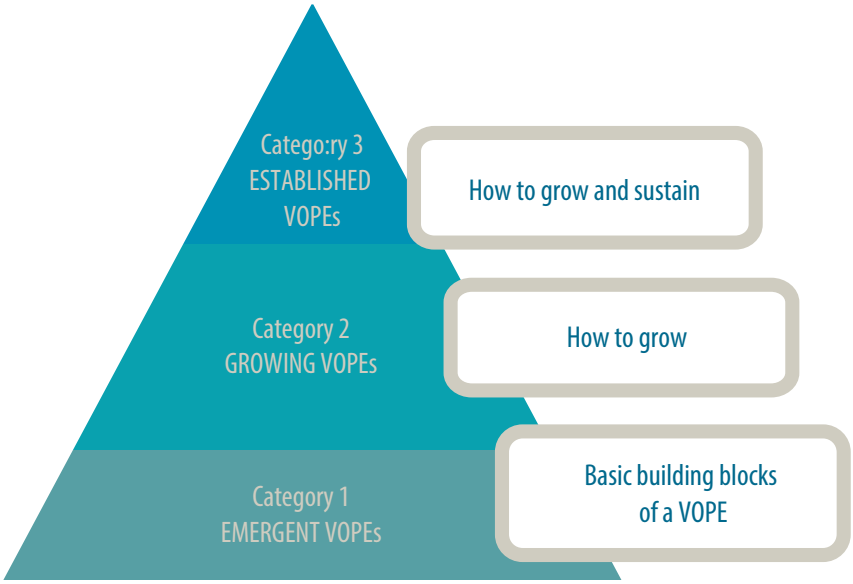


Figure 7: Responding to capacity needs

5.3 Supporting VOPEs to address internal constraints

From the information obtained during the review, it is clear that there are areas that the assistance of AfrEA could greatly benefit VOPEs. These include:

- Use the OCA tool strategically and regularly to assess where VOPEs are in their development;
- Develop templates for constitutions and other internal policies which VOPEs can adapt and use. This should include developing guidance for resource mobilisation and financial management;
- Train VOPE leadership on governance requirements. VOPE boards receive no training or mentorship. They learn from previous leadership and other VOPEs through processes that are not formalised. AfrEA could develop a basic guidance for new boards/management structures. This could include explaining the important role of the VOPE in the country's M&E ecosystem, information about AfrEA and how it works with national VOPEs, and the services available to national VOPEs, etc. In addition, AfrEA could institute an online programme to train VOPEs on governance, including power, duties and responsibilities of boards, basic fundraising, and financial management, etc. The VOPE toolkit developed by IOCE remains an important resource that AfrEA can draw from and help VOPEs to use.
- Funding and support for peer-to-peer exchanges; previous funding for peer-to-peer learning has been very beneficial for VOPEs. Through the funding, they have been able to learn from each other.

This should be something that AfrEA continues.

- The AfrEA conferences have been beneficial to the host countries. They raise the profile of M&E, and create impetus for the national VOPE to convene national dialogue on M&E. When deciding on the location of the AfrEA biennial conference, this positive developmental impact should be considered. AfrEA should actively work with the national VOPE, its partners and regional partners to ensure that the delivery of the conference raises the profile of the national VOPE and has a strong advocacy theme.
- Expand the network of VOPEs in Africa by creating new VOPEs where they do not currently exist. However, AfrEA should be careful not to establish a VOPE without an explicit objective. It is not always beneficial for organisations to be formalised as this imposes additional administration in terms of compliance with governance regulations. However, AfrEA should strive to support growth of vibrant M&E networks in different countries but only when the country is ready should AfrEA support the country in the process of formalisation of the network to create a VOPE.

AfrEA needs to find ways to address the capacity and resource challenges it faces in order to be best placed to support national VOPEs and to be an effective leader of the continental M&E agenda. This discussion document was not intended as an extensive review of the capacities and challenges faced by AfrEA and therefore does not make many recommendations on how AfrEA can do this.

5.4 Supporting VOPEs to address external threats

During the assessment of the external constraints faced VOPE, the three areas identified by Quesnel (2006) are helpful. Quesnel concludes that the success of capacity-development initiatives depends on the following:

- The awareness and appreciation at governmental decision-making levels of the importance and necessity of evaluation – in other words, the existence of a demand for evaluation;
- The institutionalisation and meaningful integration of the various evaluation functions in government structures at national, sectoral, programme/project and sub-state levels; and
- The development of human and financial resources to support a professional, dedicated, and effective cadre of evaluators and evaluation managers.

The area in which partners like CLEAR-AA, AfrEA, and other development partners can offer the most impactful assistance to VOPEs is in the creation of an enabling environment for M&E. This includes increasing awareness and appreciation of M&E by government, and by providing the requisite technical assistance to support institutionalisation efforts by government. For example, over the past five years CLEAR-AA has implemented a programme to support African governments' institutionalisation agendas. Through this programme, CLEAR-AA has provided training to governments and supported the development of M&E policies in Ghana, Zambia and Uganda, and continues to lead the development of knowledge about the functioning of M&E systems in African countries. In addition, the centre has established a programme working with legislators in different countries. This work has mainly been delivered by CLEAR-AA staff in partnership with development partners and, to a limited extent, with the VOPEs in the various countries. CLEAR-AA needs to actively integrate VOPE leadership in institutionalisation projects in the different countries. With its use of different programmes implemented in countries, CLEAR-AA is in an advantageous position to raise awareness about M&E and to raise the profile of national VOPEs amongst government stakeholders. Below are suggestions of how CLEAR-AA and AfrEA could achieve these objectives:

- VOPEs need to understand their country contexts, but lack the resources to commission such research. CLEAR-AA has carried out diagnostics of M&E systems in different African countries. This tool could be adjusted and implemented with VOPE participation to help answer some of the questions that VOPEs might have in their particular country;
- VOPEs also need to understand the impact of their capacity-building activities. This is an area where AfrEA and CLEAR-AA can also assist. CLEAR-AA has the capacity to carry out tracer studies and any

other research on M&E. These can be done in collaboration with M&E practitioners ,who are members of the national VOPE, with the aim of strengthening the capacity of local partners;

- CLEAR-AA's programme to strengthen M&E practice will be of great assistance to VOPEs who have experienced slow progress with their professionalisation agenda. The current Made in Africa debates that CLEAR-AA is leading in collaboration with AfrEA, need to incorporate VOPEs in a meaningful way. In this manner the VOPEs can own the debate and define the outputs that are the most useful to develop a practice that is truly Africa-rooted.

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