



STRENGTHENING VOPEs INTO PILLARS OF M&E ECOSYSTEMS LESSONS FOR AFRICA

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ABOUT CLEAR-AA

The Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) is one of six regional centres housed in academic institutions across the globe to build the capacity of countries, people and institutions to plan, measure and report on development programmes – a process referred to as monitoring and evaluation (M&E). CLEAR-AA's work in supporting and improving M&E contributes to better governance and improved development outcomes across Africa.

IN THIS LEARNING NOTE

- The conceptualisation and character of VOPEs in Africa is described.
- The challenges which inhibit VOPEs from achieving their founding objectives and mandates are discussed.
- Recommendations are made for the improvement of the effectiveness and impact of VOPEs in African M&E ecosystems.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021 the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results, Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) and the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) commissioned a discussion document which looked at the experiences of M&E and Evaluation Associations in Africa. It focused on a select number of Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) on the continent, exploring their functionality, the work they are doing, the challenges they face, and the opportunities that exist to strengthen their contributions to national and regional M&E ecosystems.

VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL EVALUATION (VOPEs) IN AFRICA: COMPOSITION, CHARACTERISTICS AND OBJECTIVES

There is growing recognition in Africa of the importance of Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs). A VOPE can be defined as an association of evaluation professionals which discusses and shares M&E best practices, professional experiences, and the challenges facing the evaluation profession (Kosheleva and Segone, 2013: 8)¹. VOPEs seek to enhance their members' M&E capacities and build networks with international institutions and the entire M&E ecosystem. These networks are then leveraged to both advance the career interests of members, and the interests of the M&E profession (Kosheleva and Segone, 2013: 8).

VOPEs are key in strengthening the supply of quality, credible and useful evaluations. They can also play a role in encouraging governments to develop policies and systems to monitor and evaluate performance, and thereby strengthen accountability, transparency and learning. Across Africa several organizations have made strides in embracing the role of VOPEs and have started focusing on strengthening them. However, despite their important role, VOPEs are experiencing several challenges. These include their survival as organisations and their influence on national monitoring and evaluation systems.

LESSONS EMERGING FROM THE CLEAR-AA AND AFREA DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

The composition of VOPEs

Similar to other professional associations, VOPEs are self-organised communities of practice (CoPs). They are established and constituted by commissioners and evaluators whose aim is to develop the practice of evaluation as a distinct profession that can induce better developmental planning, implementation and development outcomes. Most VOPEs are institutionalised entities that have constitutions which govern their internal affairs and interactions with members and partners.

Notably in Africa, VOPEs are not exclusive to M&E professionals. General membership of these evaluation associations includes economists, auditors, psychologists and epidemiologists (CLEAR-AA and AfrEA, 2021: 10). This diversity of VOPE membership is potentially a great resource as it can encourage the establishment of networks with governments, donors and other key stakeholders in M&E ecosystems.

The administration of VOPEs

VOPEs rely on volunteers to carry out their work and are steered by a volunteer board/governing committee of not more than 10 people, elected by the members. While there is a growing number of VOPEs with full-time secretariats or administrators, including the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA), Uganda Evaluation Association (UEA) and Senegalese Evaluation Association (SenEval), most VOPEs still have inadequate administrative capacity. Carrying the responsibility of the day-to-day management of the organisation, in addition to having full-time employment or running consultancies, puts significant strain on volunteer board members. Also, the absence of full-time administrators who outlive the terms of the temporary board members and executive committees, compromises continuity and creates a start-stop cycle. There is therefore limited carry-over of institutional memory.

Funding

A perennial challenge for most VOPEs across the globe is that they operate with limited financial resources. Membership-based organisations rely on membership fees to cover overhead costs. The VOPEs reviewed kept their fees low so that costs were not a barrier to membership for individuals and institutions. For instance, the Zimbabwe Evaluation Association (ZEA) charges \$20 for individual members, \$10 for students and \$180 for institutions. With about 150 paying members, these fees do not cover operational costs or the cost of an administrator. Similarly, the Uganda Evaluation Association (UEA) charges an annual subscription fee and once-off registration fee. The once-off registration fee for individuals amounts to \$53.80 and annual subscription fees stand at \$26.90 per member.

¹ Kosheleva, N. and Segone, M. 2013. "EvalPartners and the role of Voluntary Organisations for Professional Evaluation in the development of National Evaluation Capacity", in Rugh, J. and Segone, M. (eds.), Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs): Learning from Africa, Americas, Asia, Australasia, Europe and Middle East. UNICEF, New York.

As public benefit organisations, VOPEs are limited in the range of permitted activities to raise revenue. Across the globe associations rely on revenue from conferences and capacity-building workshops. However, the success of the conference/workshop model relies on members being able to pay a fee to attend these events. M&E is a growing field, and many practitioners are consultants who do not have full-time employment or consistent work opportunities and therefore struggle to pay. Conferences and workshops can therefore only be profitable when there is sponsorship from partners. This is the case also with VOPEs in Africa who cannot charge high fees for their activities as they will become unaffordable to most of the membership base. This exclusionary outcome is undesirable as the profession is still in its nascent phase.

Strategizing

Most VOPEs have done well in instituting formal planning by developing strategic plans and, in some cases, annual plans. However, VOPE capacity to develop a strategy for M&E remains limited. A strategy, in this sense, does not refer to the development of plans or the delivery of activities, which VOPEs have done quite well. Rather, a strategy refers to a VOPE's medium-term priority areas regarding M&E practice in a said country. In terms of formulating the aforesaid medium-term strategies, VOPEs face a common challenge in fully understanding and articulating their respective business models and understanding their place in the wider M&E ecosystem. This includes understanding competitors, collaborators and partners; understanding organisational strength; being able to deliver on strategy; and remaining responsive to an evolving context.

Partnerships

VOPEs need partners. Within countries, partnerships with government are identified as pivotal for success. Affiliation with AfrEA is also recognised by national VOPEs as providing legitimacy and connection within the continental and global M&E ecosystems. Key partners often include the Department for International Development (DFID, now known as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), African Development Bank (AfDB), CLEAR-FA, CLEAR-AA and Twende Mbele. Other partners listed by VOPEs are United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN WOMEN, United States Agency for International Development (USAID). All of these partnerships also fund core activities and deliver activities for or with national VOPEs.

However not all partnerships benefit VOPEs equally. Having more capacity and resources than national VOPEs can represent a real threat to the independence of VOPEs. Dominant partners could usurp the authority of a VOPE and thereby appropriate the country's professionalization agenda, or divert the attention of the VOPE to serve their purposes.

As a result of power imbalances, reliance on partners can make it difficult for VOPEs to influence the M&E practice of that partner. International development partners tend to rely on their own guidelines and standards for evaluation and sometimes do not use local professionals. In addition, 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, Amoatey, Taabazuing and Feinstein, 2013: 24). 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.

Benefits to society and advocacy

An important function of VOPEs is to ensure that M&E practice is of benefit to society and that communities are protected against harmful evaluative practices. From the analysis, it seems that national VOPEs are yet to develop systems to fulfil this role. Also, there is still some work to be done by VOPEs in creating a clear advocacy strategy to promote an understanding of the value of monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, evaluation associations have not been able to mobilise broader public understanding as to why public institutions should invest public resources in developing systems to better generate M&E evidence.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is clear that VOPEs remain an important element in a country's M&E ecosystem and are enablers of national capacity development. They also occupy a unique position in civil society and are able to represent professionals in a variety of sectors. VOPEs have the potential to shape M&E practice and raise awareness about the importance of M&E with the broader public. However, capacity, financial and technological barriers experienced by VOPEs are real constraints. 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 the practice of M&E, in some accountability and openness to civil society have regressed. These are all constraints to the ability of VOPEs to ensure that M&E is used as a tool to improve good governance and 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.

2 Adams, S., C. Amoatey, J. Taabazuing and O. Feinstein. 2013. Study on the Demand for and Supply of Evaluation in Ghana. Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results Anglophone Africa, Johannesburg.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institution-level:

- VOPEs must pursue financial sustainability which will ensure the effective implementation of their strategies and mandates. Financial sustainability allows for fully functional secretariats that can carry out VOPE work on a full-time basis. Exploring revenue generation is a plausible way to achieve sustainability.
- Members could market the VOPEs to ensure their visibility to government, civil society, academia and other sections of society.
- Diverse membership from various fields is an untapped opportunity.
- VOPEs should lead in embedding their M&E standards, tools, guidelines and frameworks within national, regional, continental and global development frameworks (national development goals, African Union Agenda 2063 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals). These M&E frameworks must also entail elements of transformation, equity and social justice. The African continent has a colonial legacy to which development practice must respond.

Strengthening African M&E practice:

- VOPEs must strengthen M&E practices that are responsive to policymakers and the needs of societies in African countries. This implies that VOPE M&E capacity development must have an equal focus on M&E supply, demand and use (equal focus on M&E data producers and data users [policymakers])

Strategic partnerships:

- VOPE partnerships with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) ought to refine M&E curricula, as these training programs are key to professionalising M&E in their respective countries.
- Exploring diverse finance sources will limit the risks of co-optation. This is an ever-present risk, however, as VOPEs are not-for-profit organisations.

FIND OUT MORE

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THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THE LEARNING NOTE ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHORS