

# Editorial

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Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is coming of age internationally. The year of evaluation in 2015 allowed for reflection, introspection and more importantly the space to project future emphases for M&E policies and practices. Professional associations (VOPEs) across the globe, through their conferences, seminars, online debates, TED talks and blogs, have increased access to information about specific M&E methodological approaches and topics. At the level of the United Nations we have witnessed the birth of Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Agenda 2030 considers development as a holistic, integrated, multifaceted and context-sensitive process that has diverse means and ends and is intimately linked to sustainability. Some of the lessons learned from the experiences with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) point to the need to be wary of using development indicators that misrepresent local conditions, the need for indicators and approaches to be context sensitive and the importance of involving key stakeholders.

There is an acknowledgement that development is complex and that this complexity can best be addressed if each country sets its own national agenda and strategy within the broad framework of the agreed SDGs. It encourages governments to develop national evaluation systems in which national evaluation agendas will reflect the issues that each country views as most important in its development priorities and strategies. The creation of national evaluation systems in turn points to the importance of having strong VOPEs that can support the evaluation systems through creating the spaces and places for current and emerging evaluation professionals to practise, discuss and grow their expertise.

The African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) recognises the crucial roles and functions of VOPEs to (1) strengthen national evaluation systems, (2) develop M&E and governance capacity and (3) ensure regional cooperation and sharing. The biennial conference is one vehicle where VOPEs, individuals and institutions can share their views and this journal was created to allow for ongoing, deeper reflections on daily challenges confronted at the level of policy and practice. The challenges are many but there are numerous lessons to be learned, insights to share and successes to celebrate. This edition of the AEJ brings some key M&E experiences from a large number of countries in Africa. From a systems perspective, these are views from the bottom up and should inform national and international deliberations.

Kachur, Soal and Van Blerk identify learning and accountability as two fundamental purposes of M&E. They explore how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often perceive donor accountability as the only function of their organisation's M&E system. Their research revealed that NGOs have a perception of M&E as an accountability procedure that has been imposed on them by donor communities and are resistant to it as well as to the rigid data collection regimes. Through an action-research process, involving a number of NGOs in South Africa, they suggest a model that fosters learning in M&E systems and includes two interlinked processes: self-awareness (a sense of core organisational values and intuitive ability) and awareness about the outside world and the effects of organisations' work. They believe that learning through meaningful monitoring of actions is a necessary process to satisfy effective functioning of organisations working on social change.

Howell and Obado-Joel focus on the ethical responsibility evaluators and researchers have to protect their research subjects from harm that can occur if sensitive data are revealed. Through a literature and document review they provide an overview of the protection of human subjects internationally and in Africa. They conclude that human subject protection must be supported by improved guidelines tailored to the African context and local conditions, improved infrastructure for implementing and enforcing the guidelines and increased training in awareness of human subject principles and approaches. These efforts could stimulate increased research and evaluation and more confidence in results in the communities where research is conducted.

Massey, Wyatt and Smit point to the low levels of financial literacy in South Africa and suggest that financial education projects have a significant role to play in reducing some of the demand

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side barriers to financial inclusion. They propose that, where investment in financial education interventions is mandated by the Financial Sector Codes, impact should not be the only criterion assessed when evaluating financial education projects. In the African context, where resources are scarce, money for monitoring and evaluation should be selectively channelled into determining firstly project relevance, effectiveness and efficiency and only then project impact.

Matthew and Olatunji claim that in Nigeria, many programmes have been established over the years but only little M&E has been carried out because of many implementation problems and the lack of realistic or stable policy framework. The article concludes that planning a good agricultural programme is not a problem in Nigeria but that poor implementation is, as a result of poor M&E. Therefore, attention should be on when, how and who should be involved in M&E. Ogbanna, Onwubuyam Akinnagbe and Iwuchkwu share their experiences of assessing the effectiveness and constraints of private sector extension services of the Green River Project (GRP) in Imo and Rivers states in Nigeria. The GRP was established as a result of the decrease in cultivable land due to oil exploration operations.

Dewachter and Holvoet speak to the issue of capacity building and the use of 'communities of practice' as a popular method among M&E practitioners. Their findings highlight that regular face-to-face contact is a particularly important element. Furthermore, capacity building in conducting and, particularly, using evaluations entails building networks among the M&E supply and demand side which can most easily be done through regular face-to-face interaction. They contend that in an era of quick advances in technology, investing in face-to-face contact among members remains important. Ouda and Ndung'u provide the findings of an impact study of the Dupoto-e-Maa education project in Kenya. They recommend the need to increase the number of NGOs modeled around the Dupoto-e-Maa education project so as to reduce dropout rate and improve pupil academic performance.

Agonnoude, Champagne and Leduc discuss the role of NGOs and civil society in the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Benin and the rest of Africa. They claim that these actions are perceived as ineffective because of a lack of M&E capacity with the NGOs and civil society. They implore funders and NGO leaders to understand the huge task at hand and propose: the need to develop adaptive strategies to address the varying needs. Waller, Wheaton and Asbury write about young people in South Africa and assessing efforts to provide young people with the skills and capacity to bring about change and set themselves apart as leaders. Their focus is on the implications for effective youth development programme design and the youth leadership sector more generally. They provide results that show that development of three non-cognitive competencies (grit, growth mindset and self-efficacy) was integral to starting (and finishing) a social action project. Social support, social capital and teamwork were also critical mechanisms, while school location, socioeconomic status and gender were not.

Finally, Merkle provides an analysis of progress made and challenges with respect to establishing evaluation systems and institutionalising an evaluation culture in UN Women in the Africa region. The findings illustrate that the different mechanisms to strengthen the evaluation function in UN Women show progress in the Africa region on four out of the five selected evaluation performance indicators. External assessments confirm that the UN Women evaluation function is sound overall. The article concludes that evaluation performance indicators only provide a partial snapshot of the many different factors that help or undermine evaluative thinking and a learning culture within an organisation. Institutional systems and mechanisms are necessary but not sufficient for nurturing an evaluation culture and ensuring utilisation of evaluation for better development effectiveness.

These are some of the M&E lessons learned, ideas shared and challenges confronted. Readers are encouraged to download, read, share widely and to comment on these articles – and to submit their own.