

# The Seventh Biennial South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association Conference 2019: Shaping M&E for a Sustainable Future – Editorial



## Authors:

Mark Abrahams<sup>1</sup>   
Matodzi Amisi<sup>2</sup>   
Cara H. Hartley<sup>3</sup>   
Caitlin Blaser-Mapitsa<sup>4</sup>   
Volker Schoër<sup>5</sup>   
Nedson Pophiwa<sup>6</sup>

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Southern Hemisphere, Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>CLEAR-AA, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>3</sup>Palmer Development Group, Cape Town; South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>4</sup>School of Governance, Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>5</sup>Department of Economics and Finance, Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>6</sup>CLEAR AA, School of Governance, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Mark Abrahams,  
marka@iafrica.com

## Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

The South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) endeavours to build a community of experts and practitioners that will support, guide and strengthen the development of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as an important discipline, profession and instrument for empowerment and accountability in South Africa. The South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association hosted its biennial M&E conference with the theme 'M&E for sustainable future' in November 2019. The theme was borne out of recognition that our world is ever changing and problems that societies are grappling with are vast and complex. In coining the theme, SAMEA recognised that for M&E to be able to meet the requirement of providing relevant evidence, some aspects of the profession and the practice will need to adapt. Methods, tools, theories and approaches will need to work within the context of those who must use the evidence provided by M&E. Otherwise the profession will become irrelevant. Monitoring and evaluation must be able to offer responsive and relevant evidence to decision-makers so that they are able to help shape their understanding of the challenges faced and ameliorative interventions needed. The 2019 conference provided an ideal platform for emerging evaluators to share their experiences, to learn from each other and to develop spaces for new and emerging voices to be heard.

At the time of planning the conference, SAMEA could not have foreseen how relevant that topic will become. From November 2019 our world has been gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has infected millions of people across the world, reduced both local and cross-border mobility because of travel restrictions and claimed the lives of thousands of people. It is anticipated that the impact of the pandemic will be felt over many years to come. This includes the health outcomes that are still to be understood, the impact of closure of colleges and schools, economic contraction and loss of livelihoods. It is anticipated that more likely than not, the pandemic will widen existing inequalities.

In addition, the calls for racial equality that were renewed through the Black Lives Matter uprising over decades of police brutality and other forms of systemic racism led to a wider movement across the globe to end prejudice and systemic exclusion. The evaluation sector was not spared. Pertinent questions have been asked about prejudice in the evaluation sector, about power and white supremacy. These have been difficult and uncomfortable questions for the sector to grapple with, but questions we must grapple with for the profession to remain relevant and serve its purpose as a means for social justice.

These events resonate with the SAMEA 2019 conference theme and have made the special edition pertinent. The pandemic has highlighted evermore the importance of national monitoring and evaluation capacity and country-led evaluations. Each country is affected differently depending on socio-economic, health, political and other factors. Also as travel bans were instituted, evidence was needed from those with direct access to what is happening in communities and deeper knowledge of local contexts. The need for evaluation practice that does not merely mimic global practice, but through learning from international trends and developments, remains rooted in producing evidence that is locally relevant and helps countries navigate complexity has been evident.

The development of a literature that represents the diversity of voices in shaping the practice is essential to the creation of a transformative discipline and profession. This special edition is an important developmental project of SAMEA. Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation

**How to cite this article:** Abrahams, M., Amisi, M., Hartley, C.H., Blaser-Mapitsa, C., Schoër, V. & Pophiwa, N., 2020, 'The Seventh Biennial South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association Conference 2019: Shaping M&E for a Sustainable Future – Editorial', *African Evaluation Journal* 8(1), a512. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v8i1.512>

**Copyright:** © 2020. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

**Note:** Special Collection: SAMEA 7th Biennial Conference 2019.

(VOPE) in Africa and other developing countries have to be at the forefront of supporting efforts to strengthen national evaluation capacity and creating generative space where ideas emerging from practice and in academic delivery of M&E in their countries can find expression and publication. VOPEs should encourage authorship and development of academic grade publication from the innovative and impactful work that is happening in the continent. This is critical to address the perceived general scarcity of evaluation capacity, thought leadership and theory development in Africa. This special edition is an effort to add to the growing body of knowledge about M&E practice in Africa. It also ensures that robust discussions that took place during the conference can be accessed by a wider audience. Articles in the special edition speak of pertinent discipline issues, share lessons from practice and offer some forward looking from perspectives of emerging evaluators.

The special edition opens with a practitioner reflection article by SAMEA partner and collaborator over the years, The Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Research-Anglophone Africa. Drawing from 10 years experience of building and strengthening National Evaluation Capacity in Africa, the article shares critical observations on how M&E is evolving in the continent, the organisation's system building approach to capacity building and lessons that have been learnt. These lessons and insights question some of the assumptions that underlie approaches to capacity building and would be of interest for researchers of M&E, involved in capacity building initiatives or teaching M&E.

In 'Monitoring and evaluation in a changing world: The skills needed for a new approach', Rosenberg and Kotschy (2020) reframe monitoring and evaluation skills needed in an integrated, complex world facing climate change as technical, relational and transformational competencies. This reframing implies a range of shifts in the way evaluation is viewed and evaluators are trained.

Wildschut and Silubonde (2020) discuss the formal training of evaluators in South Africa. They offer a framework for understanding the supply and demand elements shaping evaluation education. Based on the current supply and demand drivers they make recommendations for strengthening evaluation education. The article is instructive for other contexts well beyond the universities where education takes place.

Specifically looking at impact evaluation, Erasmus, Jordaan and Stewart (2020) respond to the perception that there is insufficient impact evaluation capacity in sub-Saharan Africa, which necessitates the reliance on international experts, especially from the Global North, to lead and conduct impact evaluations on the African continent. By scoping the impact evaluation capacity in sub-Saharan Africa, they challenge this view and identify substantial pockets of impact evaluation capacity across African regions and initiatives that have grown the pool of African impact evaluation expertise. Whilst their findings are promising, impact evaluation capacity still

seems to be concentrated in particular countries, disciplines and institutions. Thus, building on these existing pockets, the drive to increase impact evaluation capacity in sub-Saharan Africa through various African evaluation capacity development programmes needs to continue.

Lomofsky and Grout-Smith unpack how organisational learning from evaluative evidence can be facilitated using case study of Comic Relief, a grant-making organisation that is implementing a new learning agenda through its 'I Define Me!' (IDM) initiative. They illustrate ways in which the grant-maker supports learning through its grant-making practices and learning facilitation especially amongst its beneficiaries who comprise mostly the not-for-profit sector organisations. The article critically engages the pitfalls of results based management (RBM) paradigm in which organisations often end up proving a vision of success, rather than honestly learning from their implementation experience: an important contribution to ongoing efforts to ensure use of evaluative evidence.

The potential for civil society to play a meaningful role in governance of countries on the African continent has been a consistent theme over the last decade. The article by Mine, Amisi, David-Gnahoui, Bedu-Addo and Goldman (2020) explores how civil society organisations have become involved in the use of evidence-based policy formulation and practices in specific countries, Benin, South Africa, Kenya and Ghana and four specific sectors namely, agriculture; violence against women and children; sanitation and wildlife. The article draws on case study research on evidence use in Africa that formed part of a broader, recently published edited text 'Using Evidence for Policy and Practice – Lessons from Africa' that adds significantly to our understanding of the roles and functions that are possible for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). The authors contend, that for CSOs to engage with greater success, countries need to establish relationships and trust through dialogue, supported by strong facilitation, knowledge brokering and well-defined guidelines and incentives.

Kgaphola and Jacob (2020) challenge the predominant focus on summative evaluations within government. Using case study of a formative evaluation of the South African government HIV and AIDS programme 'You Only Live Once' colloquially known as YOLO, the article demonstrates how the evaluation was useful for adaptive management in the implementation of the programme. The authors share some limitations and difficulties in utilising formative evaluation evidence within government and offer possible solutions. The article argues for the importance of evaluator involvement in programme design and implementation not only at the evaluation stage. It also makes a case about the usefulness of formative evaluation within government, a topic without much literature.

In 'Revealing Mechanisms in Transdisciplinary Community Reforestation Research Programme,' Rosenberg and Ward

(2020) apply realist evaluation tools to better understand the results of a transdisciplinary research project. They found that mechanisms identified in the evaluation process such as orientations to research and environmental management, play an important role in the success of local sustainability initiatives and better understanding them may support the success of such work in the future.

Which voices get to shape evidence, knowledge and decisions? In their article, Jansen van Rensburg and Jansen van Rensburg (2020) reflect on the role of child participation. They offer perspectives of children on their contributions and participation in developing a document. Through an open-ended survey, the children reflected on several critical themes such as enjoyment, satisfaction, learning and awareness that they gleaned from the activity. The study concluded that children contribute unique and valuable perspectives to governance and the evaluation process.

This special edition concludes with an article co-authored by a SAMEA board member and two emerging evaluators awarded the 2019 Emerging Evaluator SAMEA Award. For emerging evaluators and those with a role in supporting them Ngwabi, Mpyana and Mapatwana (2020) provide a view into several key aspects of the emerging evaluator landscape: the views and recommendations of the emerging evaluators themselves – showing the differences and similarities across their different sectors, the emerging evaluators programme of SAMEA as a VOPE and international thinking and initiatives in this regard.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this editorial.