

Emerging Evaluator Feedback Report

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The conference theme (*Using evaluation to improve people's lives*) was especially relevant to my professional growth therefore I highly appreciate the opportunity to attend this event and gathering of professionals from all over the World.

Utilising evaluations

I attended the SAMEA Pre-conference workshop on Evaluation Utilisation presented by Laura Arntson and Virginia Lamprecht from USAID. The focus of the workshop asks the question, "Are we actually doing evaluations that are useful and that will add value" Often (across sectors and departments) evaluation is seen as a compliance exercise and as far as possible only done at the end of a programme to prove that intended outcomes were achieved. In this workshop it was highlighted that evaluation should extend far beyond this.

Further, the workshop also focussed on the importance of reflecting on the purpose of the evaluation since this will affect (when evaluations are done) if its recommendations are considered and implemented by the programme managers. Many managers do not see the value of evaluations, mainly because they are not consulted or educated on the usefulness of evaluations. Evaluation in its entirety should be incorporated in the planning of programmes and become part of management practices to become useful.

Networking

The conference provided a platform for networking with professionals connected to the field of monitoring and evaluation. It became apparent in my interactions that the "Evaluations Community" is made up of a blend of people. Some have been in the field for very long, some are just starting out and some are just interested in learning more about evaluations. The attendees represented an array of sectors ranging from government, national and provincial, NGO's national and international, consultancies and even some donor organisations. I had the opportunity of speaking to some of the attendees and share experiences related to the field.

It was especially insightful to speak to other emerging evaluators. Many challenges exist for emerging evaluators. Some of the main challenges include the limited specialised training courses, the experience required when trying to enter the field and capacity building and mentorship opportunities.

Information sharing

In a talk by Dr Ian Goldman, he suggested that DPME anticipated that 200 evaluations will be done in the next 5 years across government departments. In my view this was a very ambitious target and I immediately considered the issue of limited capacity in the field of evaluation.

The talk around the Professionalization of Evaluators drew a lot of attention. There seem to be varying views on how and even if this should be done. What stood out for me when Ms. Kate McKeeg mentioned in her key note address that whatever approach is taken in an attempt to professionalise the field, it is so that many will fall short. She continued in stating that this will result in many experienced and good evaluators being excluded from the field as they possess all the required experience, knowledge and skills acquired over many years of involvement in evaluations but they do not hold the academic qualifications. This made me think about my own area of work, since many of those involved in monitoring and evaluation are not specifically qualified with a degree to do monitoring and evaluation but they do hold academic qualifications for their occupation areas of work. However, the programmatic knowledge and other related experience that they bring often prove invaluable in our line of work.

Lessons learnt

There is a growing demand for evaluations and the public is placing greater demands on government institutions to deliver more and better services. While these demands are placed on government institutions, these institutions are faced with financial constraints and budget cuts even though improved quality services must be delivered. This in my view is that government institutions, non-profit organisations and non-government organisations need to do more with much less, begging the question whether their focus is on the right interventions or projects. It further shows that evaluations do not happen in isolation of stakeholders and that consultation and participation/involvement from the onset of the evaluation process is critical. The situation highlights the value of and the demand for evaluations in government institutions. Tendencies to focus evaluations on internal processes are another matter that can be remedied in government organisations. I am of the view that the focus should be external.

Networking has demonstrated that all attendees at the SAMEA conference are to some degree involved in evaluations. All face similar challenges and networking has contributed to the sharing of ideas, innovation and best practice. Whether it is local, regional or across the countries of Africa and other continents, the need for evaluation exist, demands on public services increases all the time and that the need of government institutions and non-government organisations to improve services. To respond to these demands, we will require a concerted effort and input in promoting evaluations where findings and recommendations thereof are implemented.

There is a limited pool of evaluators and as such all attempts for the professionalisation of Evaluators must be thoroughly researched, debated and obtain the views of a host of role-players/stakeholders before a decision is reached. Professionalisation cannot happen at the expense of losing the experience, knowledge and skills of those who have relentlessly worked for years in the field of evaluation, who has built immense knowledge of communities, cultural history, values and practices. I strongly support the idea that professionalisation cannot be instituted at the cost of losing evaluators who don't have academic qualifications.

As a last point, it is a concern that there is a particular focus on evaluations and a neglect of monitoring as a key area at the conference was evident. Why? This is an aspect that SAMEA should address as both monitoring and evaluation is important. Should one strike a balance between the two and if not, which is more important.

I thank SAMEA and its board for the opportunity afforded to me to attend the SAMEA Conference in Sandton, Johannesburg and I pleased that I am able to provide my feedback on my first SAMEA experience.