

SAMEA Conference 2015 Emerging Evaluator Report

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Firstly I would like to say many thanks to SAMEA for setting up the Emerging Evaluators programme and for the chance to attend such an inspiring and educational conference.

For me, attending the conference was a fantastic opportunity that far exceeded my expectations. As someone who is very early in their M&E career, it was incredibly valuable for many reasons, namely: to get to understand the diversity of M&E practice across the spectrum of government, civil society and the private sector; the opportunity to attend training workshops to strengthen my technical knowledge on M&E; exposure to discussions, debates and approaches in M&E that I was not previously aware of or had limited knowledge about; and the opportunity to meet and discuss with both experienced and emerging M&E practitioners from broad range of backgrounds.

Workshops and learning

The chance to attend the training workshops was a highlight of the conference, and I particularly gained a lot from attending these. The workshops I attended were Introduction to Theory of Change with Nana Davies, Innovations in Evaluation with Patricia Rogers, and Holistic Data Analysis for Stakeholder Groups. The Innovations in Evaluation workshop was especially interesting to me. Patricia Rogers is a fantastic presenter, and this workshop made me aware of the flexibility and creativity that can be involved in evaluation, rather than having to adhere to standard rules and norms around how evaluation must be done. The Theory of Change workshop was an excellent introduction to what is a staple tool in programme planning and evaluation and equipped me with a basic understanding of this approach.

Aside from the workshops, I also learned a lot about innovative approaches to evaluation in the plenary sessions. I particularly enjoyed the presentation by Aiden Choles on the Narrative Lab, combining qualitative and quantitative data, and the presentation by Yandiswa from Akhavi Development on the use of evaluation approaches in the CSI sphere.

I also very much enjoyed the presentations around further incorporating citizen voices into evaluation. The Social Justice Coalition's success with social audits was very inspiring, as was the presentation from Equal Education around citizen-based monitoring of school sanitation facilities. To me this seems like exemplary work to be followed and replicated, and it was also great to see examples of this approach from government.

Themes and discussions

It was also very useful for me to gain exposure to the prominent current debates/themes in evaluation at the conference, via the keynote sessions and the plenaries. Those that particularly stood out for me were the professionalization discussion, ethics in evaluation, and developing an African evaluation standpoint.

The professionalization discussion is very relevant to me as an emerging evaluator. The discussion raised questions around the effect professionalization would have on inclusion into the profession, standards for education and ethical codes. This is of interest to me as I have taken a particular (and

unplanned) path into the profession of M&E which includes postgraduate studies, internships, unpaid work and finally employment in the field, and I understand that others have taken different routes as there is no standardised path to becoming an evaluator.

Ethics in evaluation was also another topical debate that was presented at the conference. Another early-career M&E practitioner presented an insightful paper about the challenges of operating ethically as an evaluator, particularly when you have limited experience to help guide your decisions, and in a space where there are no fixed ethical rules or codes.

The discussion around strengthening an African-based approach to evaluation was also very interesting for me. I am not African (I am Australian) but have been working in South Africa for the last two years. It was useful as an 'outsider' who is working in this context to become familiar with this debate, which reminds me very much of the debate we have in Australia with incorporating indigenous perspectives into research processes, or conducting research from an indigenous standpoint, and acknowledging the biases and blind spots that exist when using imported/standardised methodologies.

Networking

It was a pleasure to meet so many diverse people at the conference. I got the true sense that the theme of 'Using evaluation to improve people's lives', was close to the hearts of many people I spoke to and listened to. The general passion for the transformative capacity of evaluation was evident. I was able to meet people working in areas that I had not considered before, and met others working in fields that piqued my interest as potential areas for my own career development. It was also good to meet practitioners working locally to me and understand the kind of work they were engaging in.

Overall, I would rate my experience of the 2015 SAMEA conference as an Emerging Evaluator as a fantastic opportunity to immerse myself in the M&E community, having learned a lot in terms of the technical approaches to evaluation, the diversity of M&E practice across different sectors and the topical issues in M&E in South Africa and generally.