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THE UTILITY OF THE AfrED DATABASE

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Introduction

The various chapters in this book have helped to better understand the trends and dynamics of evaluations on the continent. They show that while the evaluation field has been growing in Africa over the last two decades, there is a dearth of empirical research that will allow scholars to better understand the relationship between evaluation practice and the larger political economy that underpins the evaluation agenda in the region. This is in line with the literature which demonstrates that Africa's developmental context demands effective systems of evaluation to ensure good governance and effective programming (Basheka & Byamugisha, 2015; Porter & Goldman, 2013). At the same time, it means that the professional trajectory of the evaluation sector must grow in a way that is appropriate to the needs of the region (Tarsilla, 2014). Finally, this growth on both sides must be supported by rigorous evaluation, ample empirical data, and an evidence-informed approach to monitoring and evaluation systems development (Mouton, 2010).

The construction of the AfrED database, from which most chapters draw their analyses, is providing some initial steps in creating a foundation of information to analyse in the making of research and capacity building decisions. As it develops, it has the potential to propel the development of the sector in the right direction. Without this empirical basis to help us describe the sector, understanding the most appropriate methods to support its growth, and measuring the success of these methods, will remain an exercise in futility (Morkel & Ramasobana, 2017). This is a double challenge in the monitoring and evaluation field, where the ability to rigorously demonstrate results is central to the legitimacy of the profession.

The need for empirics to underpin evaluation

Data systems are often considered the foundation of evaluation systems (Gorgens & Kusek, 2010). While the relationship between data and evaluation is debated, there is no question that access to data is weak in Africa. This weakness remains a blight on the evaluation landscape. As just one example sixty countries in the world have complete vital registration system in place, and not one of them is in Africa (Beguy, 2016). Only 32 countries, which account for 65% of the continent's population have had a census in the last decade (Devarajan, 2013). Given the developmental landscape, it may not be a surprise

that the Statistical Capacity Index average for African countries is lower than the average for low income countries. However, it is discouraging that this has remained unchanged in over a decade (World Bank, 2017). Given that the census is often the root of data for development planning, the impact of this capacity gap is huge.

The impact of weak data systems on the evaluation sector is doubled. It is easy to see that good data are required for evaluations to be rigorous, and that accessible, affordable data are required for evaluations to be implementable. At the same time, data *about* evaluations and evaluation systems are essential to understand the effectiveness of evaluation practice. Given the centrality of measuring effectiveness in evaluation discourse, this is critical for the legitimacy of the field. When data limit the rigorousness of evaluations produced, it creates a challenge to building the evaluation sector. However, when data also limit available information about the evaluation sector, it becomes that much harder to argue for the importance of evaluations in the region.

This double affect is even further amplified when considering that current global trends in the evaluation sector are promoting the use of meta-analysis and systematic review techniques, described by Vedung (2010) as the fourth wave of evaluation diffusion. The importance of strong systems of empirical data vary by wave, but it is an unfortunate confluence that the growth in African evaluation systems coincides with a global emphasis on experimental design, and heavily quantitative approaches which rely all the more on rigorous data systems.

Challenges to building data systems for evaluation

Given the interlinkages spelled out above between data systems and evaluation systems, it follows that the constraints to robust data systems in Africa cannot be divorced from those faced by the evaluation sector.

One challenge links immediately to the availability of skills in the region to both build and manage data systems, as well as to analyse and evaluate their contents (Mouton, 2011). Not only are there skills shortages in Africa, there is no consensus on which skills are required for professional evaluators, as professionalisation of the evaluation sector remains emergent (Abrahams, 2015). In spite of these robust or unresolved debates, there is little question that there is a gap in appropriately skilled evaluation practitioners in Africa.

A second challenge is that Africa continues to experience growth in the digital divide, at a time when many of the fastest growing global industries are in digital science (Hilbert, 2016). The increase in real time, crowd sourced, and other “new-wave” data offers many promises for better understanding the transformative promises of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, there are many restrictions to African evaluators accessing, let alone creating, open data repositories. Many technological innovations in this space offer a promise of opportunities for the continent, such as increased file sharing, e-books, increased open-source academic publishing, and P2P file-sharing networks (Kitchin, 2014). However, with each innovation also come limitations. The availability of data may well require more ICT resources to access, more analytical resources to engage with, and more sophisticated legal support around intellectual property to publish on (Bezuidenhout, Leonelli, Kelly & Rappert, 2017). The rapid change in the way and scale on which data are generated holds significant promise for people and institutions with resources constraints to be able to use data for decision-making, although these innovations do not solve, but rather shift, the previous barriers.

The contribution and limitations of the database

The AfrED has started providing an empirical base for many claims in the sector. However, this was a first iteration of the database, and even when it is more robust there are limitations to what it can contribute to the discussion.

The most immediate limitation of that database is around its construction. Many evaluation databases were not included in the initial construction. It was impossible for the database to be exhaustive, due to limitations of time and resources, and it is hoped that with new approaches, including greater collaboration with evaluation commissioners in the future, the next iteration of the database will be more exhaustive. Even without a completely exhaustive database, however, it was possible to start pulling out specific trends with robust information from certain agencies while acknowledging that there are gaps.

The AfrED database was built by the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST), one of Africa’s leading institutions for database development. The two collaborating organisations saw the need for the database to move forward the research agenda in the evaluation field. However, there was an initial challenge in defining the scope of the work, since the population of peer-reviewed articles on evaluations and evaluation reports themselves were not known.

The actual database itself is a modest first step in pulling together information from the evaluation sector. While it was possible to do a comprehensive review of academic peer-reviewed journal articles, this population was larger than expected. While this is a nice surprise, it makes the initiative larger in scale than expected, and all of the issues highlighted in the section above (ranging from resource scarcity to more tools to navigate intellectual property and a need for more information on the landscape) come all into play.

The initial idea was that a large percentage of the evaluation reports themselves could be included in the database, but the scope of work did not allow for this. Similarly, the survey of evaluation commissioners and practitioners was only able to include a small percentage of the relevant stakeholders. However, the emergent research and articulated needs have demonstrated that these two areas are critical for creating a foundation of information for future research in the sector.

While this database contributes to research on the African evaluation landscape, one data point will not solve systemic problems. The challenges facing African data systems, and those facing the evaluation sector, will require a systems-wide approach, resourcing, and a multi-stakeholder partnership to address in a more comprehensive way.

Government-led evaluations, which will be central to understanding how public sector evaluation systems in Africa are evolving, were not comprehensively included in the database. This is due to a range of challenges the public sector faces in making evaluations easily accessible by the public in a centralised database.

Even once the evaluations contained in the database are more comprehensive, there will still be limits to what empirical evidence can bring to the evaluation landscape. The diversity of views across the sector will remain and will likely result in contested interpretations of the data. If this can contribute to robust debate, the evaluation sector will no doubt be the richer because of it.

Empirical contributions to evaluation research

The evaluation sector in Africa is evolving rapidly, and Africa's unique developmental context means that the profession and its trajectory of growth takes on its own shape. However, without a foundation of evidence that helps us

describe the sector, understanding the most appropriate methods to support its growth, and measuring their success, will remain an exercise in futility. The construction of the AfrED database has started providing this foundation; as it develops, it can help propel the development of the sector.

Some of the big-picture impressions and assumptions about the evaluation landscape are now being empirically validated, and this will help direct the evaluation research agenda moving forward. Here are a few highlights of some big questions and emerging answers.

Assertion 1 Evaluators for African projects are flown in from the West

Evidence from the database is showing that this is generally true. While there are variations by commissioning agency, and acknowledging that identity and country of residence can be complex, lead evaluators on donor projects are generally not African. Chapters 2 and 3 discovered the scale and scope of the phenomenon and discussed some of the questions this raises for how we support an African evaluation sector. It then becomes an urgent priority of research to better understand the implications this has on the content of evaluations and the ways that they are used.

Assertion 2 When reference is made to 'evaluation', most people really mean monitoring

This is also generally true. While evaluations are growing in number in the region, Chapter 7 has found that even when M&E systems conduct evaluations, these generally serve the purpose of monitoring by looking at progress against predetermined results, and rarely manage to support the function of strategic decision-making. Evaluations have the potential to provide evidence in response to some of the most pressing development challenges the region faces and could steer effective governance systems and development practice. However, if evaluation instead becomes another cog in the wheel of malicious bureaucratic compliance, it will fall far short of these aspirations.

Assertion 3 Since evaluation has not yet professionalised, evaluations are not of sufficient quality to be useful

The answer here is mixed. Chapter 5 found that there are certainly evaluations that do not meet minimum quality standards. However, a larger number are

high quality, and the majority sit somewhere in between. Chapters 1 and 7 also discuss how different stakeholders may have different definitions of quality. Accommodating this diversity is important to consider as the sector evolves.

Assertion 4 Evaluation in Africa is growing

This seems mostly true. Acknowledging that the final year of the database had a drop-off in submissions, most likely due to time lag, there have been a large and consistent increase in the number of peer-reviewed journal articles and evaluations themselves, even since 2005. This perceived growth of the sector is empirically demonstrable. There is reason to believe (and needs to be verified) that as public-sector evaluation systems grow, the evaluation sector will grow even more rapidly.

New directions for research

This book is the start of a research agenda rather than the conclusion of one. Due to the birth of data in the evaluation sector, each data set asks more questions than it answers. This was certainly the experience of the contributing authors to this book.

On evaluation capacity and practice there is absolutely a need to better understand the profile of current evaluators and commissioners in the region. While we now have some information about the qualifications, experiences, and interests of evaluators, more work is needed to interrogate whether these strengths match the needs, and how evaluation practitioners themselves understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation practice. The issue of appropriate evaluation skills and capacity urgently requires more research to better define what should inform capacity-building approaches in Africa.

On methods and approaches, it is clear that evaluation reports do not always robustly reflect the methods and approaches used. In future the database can only be one source of information. However, it can start a conversation about the process of selecting methods for evaluations. It is clear that methods and approaches chosen often sit at the nexus of contestation between evaluator and commissioner. It is evident that a range of methods are being used in the region, but more work is needed to better understand what this means in terms of evaluation quality and use. Additionally, it is important to bring

this data back to questions of evaluation capacity and practice to see whether methodological questions and needs are driving capacity-building practice, or whether capacity (or other gaps) are limiting methodological approaches in the region.

Finally, on the issue of purpose and use, it is clear that stakeholders vary tremendously in the reasons for conducting evaluations – and in their ability to use the results. Better understanding this will help uncover how the construction of evaluation systems can drive reform in the region. Identifying the opportunities and gaps in this area will be critical to determining the extent to which evaluation can contribute to developmental outcomes in Africa.

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