South African experience building capacity and supporting rapid evaluation

Due to the need for rapid evidence during the COVID-19 pandemic, work on rapid evaluation was initiated in South Africa by a collaboration between the Western Cape Government (WCG) and the National Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (DPME), which introduced rapid evaluation guidelines and training. This article presents two cases conducted by the government and highlights an initiative taken by the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) to support rapid evaluations for non-profit organizations (NPOs).

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Key Messages

▌ Rapid evaluations can to generate evidence for decision-making at reduced cost. They can also be used to build evaluation capacity of staff.

▌ It is important to select the appropriate topics for rapid evaluations due to limited time. Formative evaluations are most suitable unless there is existing data for analysis.

▌ Although REs can be conducted by staff, experienced evaluation facilitators are very valuable for conducting effective evaluations and training staff.

Introduction

This paper summarizes the South African experience since 2020 in applying rapid evaluations (REs) in government, and the role of the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) in supporting REs in the Non-Profit Organization (NPO) sector. It outlines the lessons from this experience, highlighting the collaborative efforts and innovative approaches that enhanced capacity building.

South Africa established its national evaluation system in 2011. These evaluations were outsourced, and took 8-12 months to produce an approved evaluation report; longer when the time for management responses and improvement plans is included (Goldman et al., 2015). Moreover, the evaluations were selected and agreed upon well in advance, reducing flexibility and responsiveness.

Around 2015, demand for more rapid and responsive evaluations started to emerge within the DPME, and some initial attempts were taken to consider workshops as a rapid alternative. The Western Cape Provincial Government (WCG), an evaluation champion in South Africa, was also interested in taking forward rapid evaluation, encouraged by one of the paper authors who was supporting them after 2018. They decided to develop their own guideline, and with the collaboration of DPME developed a guideline that served both WCG and DPME. These guidelines were produced in May 2020, virtual training held for the WCG in June 2020. *Twende Mbele* funded training for DPME in December 2020, translation of the DPME guideline into French, for French-language training in Benin, and English-language training in Uganda and Kenya. UNICEF/CLEAR Anglophone Africa also conducted training for other African governments using the RE guideline in 2020 and 2021, as part of strengthening capacity to include evaluations ▶▶

in country Voluntary National Reviews of the Sustainable Development Goals. CLEAR Lusophone has also adapted the guidelines for Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa.

Meanwhile in the light of these developments SAMEA also decided to encourage rapid evaluations, initially through the hackathon conducted in October 2021, and subsequent implementation of the RE plans developed.

This paper highlights emerging lessons on RE implementation, derived both from government and SAMEA's experiences with supporting REs.

Rapid evaluation in the literature

A wide variety of approaches and methodologies have been used in the broad area of RE, with the term real-time evaluations often applied in humanitarian contexts. In developing the WCG/DPME RE guideline it was deliberately decided not to use the term real time, which is more applicable to real time monitoring, and rather use the term rapid. McNall & Foster-Fishman, (2007) summarize different approaches some of which include:

■ Real-time evaluations, developed for humanitarian crises such as COVID-19, systematically collecting data;

■ Rapid feedback evaluations using existing program data to make a quick, preliminary assessment of program performance;

■ Rapid assessments, deploying teams of researchers to gather information using surveys, interviews, focus groups, transect walks, and mapping;

■ Rapid ethnographic assessment, which use a limited range of research methods and focus on exploring indigenous understanding of health issues;

Rapid evaluation and assessment methods, used to gather data in emergency response situations and share information in real-time (Mertens & Wilson, 2019).

Demand for Rapid Evaluation

REs became attractive due to their short timeframe, typically ranging from six to 12 weeks, and their lower cost. The reduced time makes it feasible for evaluand staff to be part of the team, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration, while facilitating staff capacity building. Budget cuts effected in the South African government since the mid-2010s have led to demand for REs as a low-cost alternative. However, some topics are not appropriate for rapid evaluation and care should be taken to avoid inappropriate application of REs (see Table 1).

DPME (2020) proposes three options for implementation of REs: fully conducted by internal staff, fully outsourced, or facilitated, i.e. conducted by staff with the support of an experienced evaluator. WCG is also considering a partial outsourced model, with an external service.

Progress with rapid evaluations

Gaining traction in government

Aware that much training is never used, the design of the RE training conducted for the WCG and DPME focused on ensuring its application. The training aimed to help internal teams prepare terms of reference for outsourced evaluations, or to develop an evaluation plan if implemented by staff, with the understanding that the evaluation would be implemented shortly afterwards. For WCG, the training involved four teams reviewing the following COVID response measures: supply chain measures, interventions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the health system, provision of food aid, and small business relief. The training was conducted virtually over 2.5 days, and the teams undertook their evaluations afterwards. By March 2023, the WCG had conducted six REs. Similar training was undertaken for DPME in December 2020 with three teams. Box 1 summarizes the experience of one WCG evaluation.

Table 1: Situations favoring rapid and traditional evaluations (DPME, 2020, p5)

Type of evaluation	Situation favors
Rigorous major evaluation	Where you need to be very sure that the picture is correct: • Where the program or policy is very large, and you need a very clear picture of benefits and how it is working; • Where the implications of the policy/ program are critical and will affect people's lives; • Where much is at stake, or there is a lot of contention about the program or policy so it is key that the result can't be challenged.
	Where you can anticipate and plan for the decision points by scheduling the evaluation well in time
Rapid evaluation	Where evidence is needed within 2-3 months
	For organizational learning and problem-solving, where the primary purpose is formative to feed-in to ongoing policy and planning processes
	Where the evaluation budget is very limited
	Where focusing on narrower topics and/or specific geographical areas

In November 2021, a virtual training session on RE was run at DPME's national evaluation seminar. This was followed by additional virtual trainings in March 2022 for KwaZulu Natal (KZN) Province and Mpumalanga Provincial Government (MPG). In 2023, MPG requested physical training, which was run in June/July 2023 with 1 day online and six weeks later a 2.5-day physical training with seven teams, who at the time of writing are about to go into the field.

Another RE champion, the Department of Social Development (DSD), carried out over seven REs, including one on homelessness and food relief during the COVID-19 pandemic and another on the 2021 KZN unrest.

Taking forward Rapid Evaluations in SAMEA

In 2021, the SAMEA board planned an evaluation hackathon as an alternative to the biennial conference, which could not be held face-to-face due to COVID-19. One theme of focus was "M&E during times of crisis," and SAMEA decided to incorporate strengthening RE capacity. The hackathon took place in October and teams had two weeks to design and plan a RE. Three teams under this theme planned a RE for an education NPO. The teams were led by experienced evaluators and included ▶▶

Box 1: Western Cape Evaluation of the Provincial Government's Hotspot Strategy

A previous RE conducted in 2020 evaluated WCG's strategic response, effectiveness, and efficiency in slowing the spread of Covid-19. The purpose of this particular RE was to assess the implementation of the Provincial Hotspot Strategy and evaluate the whole of government's strategic response, effectiveness, and efficiency in slowing the spread of the virus and simultaneously responding to the associated risks. The evaluation was conducted by five staff from the Department of the Premier in collaboration with the Departments of Health and of Local Government and took 12 weeks from the start of the evaluation to draft report stage. There were three evaluation expert groups tasked with (1) a document and secondary data review; (2) online survey; and (3) interviews and focus group discussions.

The findings demonstrated which policy initiatives have potential for the WCG moving forward, and highlighted that more support for leadership development, change management and organizational culture is required.

Source: DoTPulse Newsletter 39 (undated)

researchers, evaluators, staff from the evalu- and organizations, and emerging evaluators (EEs). SAMEA provided guidance in the form of an evaluation plan outline, resources, and presentations on the RE guidelines. The teams made good progress, and draft evaluation plans were submitted after two weeks. Some team members continued working afterward to refine their evaluation in plans after submission. Two team outputs were peer reviewed and close out meetings held February-April 2022 where the evaluation plans were handed over to the evaluand organizations, with one handed over incomplete.

Subsequently, funding was secured to implement the REs, facilitated by experienced evaluators who worked with EEs and NPO staff, and built their capacity in the process. A 3-day training on basic research methods for evaluation was delivered to equip the teams with fundamental research skills like interviewing, designing surveys and data analysis. Two REs took approximately three and four months to complete. A SAMEA board member provided oversight to ensure quality and alignment. Box 2 summarizes the experience of one of these evaluations.

Emerging lessons

Emerging lessons distilled from the RE experiences of government and NPOs are presented below.

Selecting the right topics was imperative. The REs we have discussed were selected for speed. Selecting topics suitable for REs and avoiding scope creep was imperative. As indicated in Table 1 REs are suitable for formative feedback on early implementation, but not impact evaluations, unless data already exists. The selected government REs were typically seeking rapid insights: WCG's formative evaluations of COVID-19 response initiatives, the DSD response to the KZN floods and unrest. For the NPO, the relative affordability of REs was critical, and capacity building was beneficial to all type s of organizations.

An experienced evaluation facilitator was helpful for ensuring quality in the SAMEA cases where staff do not have evaluation expertise. It is important to clarify the model – internal, facilitated, and outsourced – depending on the context, skills amongst staff, and ability to recruit an evaluation expert to lead the team.

Box 2: Rapid Evaluation of Heartbeat Clowns

A design and formative evaluation was undertaken for Heartbeat Clowns (HBC), an NPO focused on upskilling youth and creating job opportunities through medical clowning. Medical clowning is a therapeutic approach in which professional clowns, trained to work in healthcare settings, interact with patients to provide emotional support and promote well-being. The RE aimed to inform the refinement of HBC's program in response to COVID-19 disruptions. The key objectives included examining the program design and articulating its implicit theory of change, along with assessing the 2018 pilot to identify the program features that worked well and those that did not.

The evaluation took place from July to October 2022. Good preparation, including the development of a comprehensive evaluation matrix, helped to streamline data collection, and there was close engagement with primary users.

Challenges were encountered due to a steep learning curve and varying competencies of the EEs. The process highlighted the intricacies of REs, requiring swift decision-making and flexibility in adjusting the evaluation plan to meet evolving objectives, and was critical for effective resource allocation. The demanding RE process necessitated steadfast commitment from the team. The evaluation facilitator's role, which was aided by virtual tools for remote teamwork and data collection, was pivotal. HBC's journey highlights the trade-offs between speed and precision in REs.

To enhance awareness and capacity for undertaking REs, SAMEA organized a comprehensive 4-day RE training. The training took three days in August 2023, and one day in September, when teams presented their RE plans.

Seriti Programme Implementing Team after semistructured interviews

SAMEA chose the facilitated model, Western Cape used staff as the evaluation leads, while MPG are aiming to recruit evaluation facilitators, although the supply chain process has delayed them. With the NPOs the role of evaluation facilitators was key. With SAMEA's experience with the NPOs, facilitators initiated and drove the evaluations, balancing pace and quality, harnessing team members' strengths while nurturing a conducive space for learning.

Good preparation was very important, as shown in the HBC rapid evaluation. Critical tasks during preparation include assessing data availability, assembling a proficient team of staff or EEs, assessing their capacity, and ensuring their ability to allocate the time required. Based on the experience in Kenya, in Mpumalanga the preparatory phase was separated, dedicating a day to clarifying the focus of the evaluation and understanding the preparation needed, and then leaving six weeks for this preparation, before the main training of the teams to prepare their evaluation plans. Establishing an evaluation steering committee in the preparation phase is very important for fostering organizational buy-in and providing oversight and should be established in the preparation phase. While this committee was not necessary for the NPO evaluations such as HBC, it would have been helpful for the evaluations in the Western Cape, for example where evaluations were conducted by Office of the Premier on the work of other provincial departments, but this committee was not established.

The evaluation design provides a roadmap. Part of the design is **if the evaluation will be undertaken virtually.** HBC's geographically dispersed team primarily collaborated virtually via online meeting platforms. Undertaking some of the work virtually saved time and resources for travel. Technology like transcription software and artificial intelligence applications which assist with analysis have the potential to enhance efficiency. Note that as part of the hackathon SAMEA also led work on virtual evaluation and produced a guideline on this. ▸▸

There is a delicate **trade-off between quality, speed and building capacity,** integrating evaluand staff and EEs into the process, while simultaneously developing their skills and producing a good quality evaluation. While using staff helped to build capacity, a need emerged to ensure confidentiality when internal staff are involved in data collection, and some interviews may be better conducted by outsiders.

Peer review was not used, but would have been helpful to assist with quality, and to ensure objectivity. For rapid peer review, systems need to be in place to enable quick mobilization of the peer reviewers.

Utilization of findings is critical. DSD and WCG's experience show REs can inform swift decision-making, aiding in addressing service delivery challenges when rapid evidence is needed. Involving staff in evaluating their programs contributed to process use and enhanced ownership and buy-in. However, there is a need to be alert to the potential for gatekeeping of critical findings and ensure transparent dissemination, which is where steering committees have a key role to play.

Conclusion

The attractiveness of REs for their speed, lower cost, and potential to upskill staff has prompted other government departments, provinces, and cities in South Africa to embrace this approach, as well as in other African countries. Notable implementors in South Africa include the DPME and the WCG, which have reported positive outcomes on their decision-making processes. Similarly, the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI), Department of Social Development (DSD), and Department of Human Settlements (DHS) have adopted REs, finding it crucial for maintaining evidence-based decisions amid shrinking budgets. SAMEA continues to provide capacity building workshops as part of its adaptive management portfolio, and *Twende Mbele* continues to support rapid evaluation. Moving forward, the effectiveness of REs will depend on a robust support system that includes skilled evaluation facilitators, training of government staff in which evaluations are suitable for REs as well as evaluation and research skills, and peer review mechanisms to ensure quality and expand adoption. eVALU

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Authors' profiles

Ian Goldman is an Adjunct Professor at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance at the University of Cape Town. He previously served as Deputy Director General in South Africa's Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, where he established South Africa's national evaluation system and has been promoting the use of RE in government. He is the President of the International Evaluation Academy (IEAc), and an Advisor on M&E systems with the JET-IP climate fund in South Africa's Presidency, the Global Evaluation Initiative, Operation *Vulindlela,* and CLEAR Anglophone Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand. He was a SAMEA board member from 2020-2023. He wrote the WCG/DPME guideline on rapid evaluation, ran the training for them, as well as for Mpumalanga Provincial Government and African Development Bank.

Moses Mashingaidze has over 10 years of experience in M&E and research. He holds a Master's in Monitoring and Evaluation as well as a Master's in Economics, and is currently pursuing his PhD in Evaluation Studies. He has a keen interest in M&E evidence uptake and utilization. His work includes spearheading the digitization of M&E processes across non-profit organizations in South Africa. He has been involved in several evaluations for government and NPO sectors. In addition, Moses has conducted over 10 REs in South Africa. He is Associate Director - MERL at Data Innovators and was a SAMEA board member from 2021-2023 where he led the work on REs and Emerging Evaluators (EEs).

Eleanor Hazell is Executive Manager, M&E at JET Education Services. In this role, she leads a team of M&E Specialists, provides M&E support, and evaluates education and social programs in South Africa and the rest of Africa. She has undertaken REs even before she heard of the term. Eleanor was a SAMEA board member from 2020 to 2023, where she co-conceptualized and organized the 2021 evaluation hackathon, led the evaluation during times of crisis theme and supported the RE hackathon teams. Eleanor has dual Master's in Development Studies and M&E Methods and is a Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg.