**South Africa: South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA)**

Voluntarism, Consolidation, Collaboration and Growth – The case of SAMEA

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**Background:**

**Phases and Growth**

The evolution of SAMEA as national association has several phases: a lengthy incubation phase, formalization as national association and consolidation, positioning it for demand and growth. These are driving forces in founding SAMEA, in its evolutionary development and consolidation anticipating growth going forward.

**Incubation**

This phase covers roughly the late seventies through eighties till 2004. In this time, interest in and demand for evaluation in South Africa was, in the main, donor-driven through multiple non-governmental organizations, sometimes linked to universities and to the church, driving an agenda for change in opposition to the policies of the Nationalist Party and its exclusionary apartheid structures. Key in those times was: the movement of a cadre of senior ANC leadership and members into exile; mass protest including by women, university students (noted by Sir Robert Birley as being exemplary internationally), clerics and churches; organized visits to the country by individual icons providing a beacon of hope for mass opposition to government policy such as by US Senator Robert Kennedy in the eighties; a groundswell of mass action by school students against apartheid such as in Soweto. These events sketch the context and background of the incubatory phase leading to the founding of SAMEA.

Against this background, donor funding of non-governmental agencies and their programs has been estimated in billions of rands annually, donors seeing evaluation as a tool to gauge the effectiveness of the programs they fund to help establish if these effectively assisted targeted groups, the disadvantaged and poor particularly. Whilst demand for evaluation was driven by donors and supply mechanisms were not as yet in place in the country, evaluators were contracted from outside its borders to monitor and evaluate programs here. At the same time, in the early eighties embryonic courses in evaluation found their way into university curricula leading to post-graduate diplomas and degrees, and independent consultancies offered training in evaluation usually leading to certificates of attendance.

At this time, educators from across the spectrum around the country focused minds on the question of quality and how to assess it; these debates being specifically, but not exclusively, on assessment in education. Assessment and evaluation, in this phase, was the specific focus of debate. This loose corpus of individuals from local schools, examining entities, universities, and professional associations, in addition to individuals from international institutions and examining boards, ran a conference in 1994, to debate international trends in assessment and interrogate the newly released ANC document on assessment and evaluation for South Africa under its first democratically elected government led by President Nelson Mandela. The conference coalesced these energies into an association (ASEESA) which continues debate on assessment. Omitted for the most part was debate on evaluation, which set the stage for the next phase in the development of a national association.

**Establishment and Consolidation**

This phase in the evolution of SAMEA covers roughly 2004 till the present. It sees the proliferation of formal courses in evaluation, interest in evaluation theory and practice, attendance at evaluation conferences in Europe, North America, Australasia, and particularly at conferences where the internationalization of evaluation was the theme (joint AEA and CES). This interest in effect brought ‘evaluation’ back into the debate, as well as its link to ‘monitoring’. In the new millennium, practitioners and academics interested in evaluation
(program evaluation specifically rather than assessment) shared knowledge about evaluation to prevent re-inventing the wheel.

On the margins of the 3rd African Evaluation Association Conference co-hosted by the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) and the Public Service Commission (PSC) in 2004, a special meeting was held at the AfrEA event to begin to formalise an association in South Africa, building on SAEnet. In November 2005, SAMEA was formally launched with Jennifer Bisgard as Chair. In 2007 the Inaugural SAMEA Conference was organized around the Theme ‘Evaluation in Action’. This was followed in 2009 by the second Biennial Conference on the theme, ‘e-VALU-ation’, with Mark Abrahams as Chair, and the 3rd Biennial Conference on the theme, ‘M&E 4 Outcomes: Answering the “So What? Question’, with Candice Morkel as Chair. All three conferences were co-hosted by the Public Service Commission of South Africa, and co-funded by the German Technical Agency (GIZ).

In 2010, the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) was established in the Office of the Presidency as the custodian of M&E in the country with a staff of approximately 200 posts, and a budget of approximately USD $20 million. During its short existence the DPME has drafted and had approved by Cabinet the National Evaluation Policy Framework (2011), and formally established with SAMEA, as national M&E association, a standing committee for collaboration between SAMEA and DPME.

Thereafter follows a period of consolidation of SAMEA as a national evaluation association for anticipated future growth resulting from increased demand for monitoring and evaluation by government particularly. With three bi-annual conferences behind it, founding documents guiding its formation and activities, a dedicated website and listserv to keep in touch with members and extend evaluation more widely in the country, SAMEA now grapples with consolidating the association to better serve its membership and M&E more widely in the country and beyond. Perhaps the critical debate grappled with, and well known in the evolution of M&E associations internationally, is the tension between inspired ‘volunteer’ ‘champions’ driving the association, and, the need of hard cash driving the association. Without a ‘champion’ there is likely to be a paucity of ideas in it as a national association, and, without hard cash to implement, ideas may remain on paper only. Both are needed. And similar to the international experience, SAMEA champions are primary, but the association often lack the funds, time and facilities to give ideas practical effect as demanded of a national association. With hard cash often insufficient, many needed activities to build the association as planned have not always materialised (SAMEA Strategic Plan 2007-10).

Founders and Protocols
Key founders of SAMEA include, amongst others Jennifer Bisgard, Zenda Ofir, Kevin Kelly, Indran Naidoo, Fanie Cloete, and Mark Abrahams. Its Board is composed of 10 members elected using a purpose-developed, tried and tested electronic system providing an opportunity for individual members throughout the country to self-nominate or be nominated to stand for election to the Board. Nominees provide a photo of themselves, a CV and a Statement of Intent in which they commit themselves to serve the membership during their tenure by committing to actions they anticipate making to SAMEA during their term of office. An Executive Committee is elected by the Board from amongst its members. A Board member’s term of office extends over three years, at the conclusion of which their term automatically terminates. A Board member may be elected again following a sabbatical period of one year off the Board.

Strategy and Implementation
**Strengthening an Enabling Environment**
Guided by its strategic goals to advocate for M&E, provide a platform for interaction around M&E issues, promote professional and ethical standards for evaluation and organize annual national capacity building M&E workshops (Abrahams 2007), SAMEA is one of four initiatives having as their aim the strengthening of the enabling environment for evaluation in the country, three having been launched in the past 2 years. Broadly speaking, each has a
commitment to creating what Segone (2007) refers to as a country-led strategy for national evaluation capacity development, to strengthen the enabling environment for evaluation.

The most influential initiative, led appropriately by Government, the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) was established in 2010. DPME is placing evaluation units or departments in each of the three tiers of government, at the national level located in the Office of the Presidency, at the provincial level located in the Office of the Premier in each of the 9 provinces, as well as in local government offices. In doing so, DPME has provided, amongst others, a national evaluation framework, Evaluation Plan, evaluation standards and competencies, each strengthening an enabling environment for evaluation, which at the same time lays a foundation for strengthening accountability, transparency and managing for results. With its establishment has come a new emphasis namely, strengthening evaluation systemically.

Next in creating an enabling environment for evaluation are two initiatives, both located in universities as host institutions of evaluation: the CLEAR initiative at the University of the Witwatersrand and Crest at the University of Stellenbosch. The former is a World Bank initiated and supported initiative with the aim of evaluation field building in South and Anglophone Africa by working closely with governments on multiple evaluation-related activities, including mapping the field and growing scarce evaluation skills in governments. It offers specialist capacity building courses and scholarships enabling those with limited resources to attend, funds evaluation activities with government relating to evaluation demand, evaluation projects such as developing evaluation standards and competencies, tracking university courses in evaluation, and the like. The Crest Centre more specifically focuses on high level specialist course in evaluation leading to both post-graduate diplomas and to degrees up to and including a PhD. With both initiatives targeting individuals and governments in South African and in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, they strengthen an enabling environment for evaluation here and beyond our borders.

Other players strengthening the enabling environment for M&E in SA include: national state departments, such as the Public Service Commission (OPSC), Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA); national and private foundations, such as the GIZ, Zenex; universities, including the Universities of Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg, KwaZulu Natal and Fort Hare; and independents and M&E consultancy groups such as Feedback, Khulisa, MK Consulting and Southern Hemisphere. Summarising, creating an enabling environment for evaluation aimed at strengthening accountability, transparency and managing results is larger than SAMEA, but includes it as a leading national professional association. Creating an enabling environment, for the most part, is led by the national government strongly supported also by funded national and international initiatives, as well as other players including state departments, foundations, universities and independents. At this early stage, strengthening the enabling environment in the country entails a strong commitment by government, specifically, as well as partners, to accountability, transparency and managing by results. Government leads by promulgating a corpus of legislation presently institutionalizing M&E systemically at local through national levels of government, though a shortage of skills at this early stage hampers accountability and managing by results. And, with SAMEA as one player building capacity to monitor and evaluate policy implementation and programmes in and outside government, it provides a platform for debate for feedback from a specialist M&E citizenry, and it contributes to developments in evaluation. SAMEA, as national professional association in collaboration with partners, contributes to an environment for strengthening accountability and management to deliver on outcomes.

National evaluation capacity development in South Africa requires some debate to achieve an understanding of it as a country-led evaluation system aimed at moving from policies to results or outcomes. In this regard, the Board believes it has a role to play. Segone’s (2007: 31-32) capacity development framework, addressing the demand as well as the supply side of evaluation in countries, provides a valuable tool to this end. Along 2 axes, he considers the “technical quality and trustworthiness of evaluation” on the one hand, and “the enabling policy environment” on the other hand, in the end arriving at a taxonomy of
country-led M&E systems. Of four classifications, SA arguably escapes the category of “vicious circle countries” where evidence provided government is “technically weak and policy-makers have little capacity to make use of it.” And, like most countries, it aspires to becoming a part of “virtuous circle countries” where evidence provided is “...technically robust and is being used increasingly for decision-making.” Subject to debate is whether as a country SA arguably may be appropriately categorised as an “evidence supply-constrained country,” where evidence is technically weak, but is increasingly demanded by policy-makers. In this case, technically weak evidence reduces the quality of decision-making and therefore the quality of services delivered. It follows that policy-makers are likely to resent being held to account on the basis of inadequate evidence, and thus that the priority should be to adopt measures to increase the quantity and quality of evidence. Here the challenge is to strike the balance between quickly making improvements to evidence, whilst laying the foundations for better performance of the country-led M&E system in the long run.

Whether the above better describes M&E systemically and more so than the category “evidence demand-constrained countries” foregrounding improved quantity and quality of evidence, and where it is not demanded because policy makers lack the incentives and/or the capacity to utilise it, may be moot. Nevertheless, the framework usefully extends our understanding M&E systemically in terms of evaluation supply and demand. Debate in SAMEA also has turned our minds to this issue: useful have been two metaphors: one to depict systemic M&E in the country a second reminding of the purpose of evaluation, and a discussion of a substantive evaluation emphasis to pursue.

Summarizing some of the discussions taking place within SAMEA, the Board takes the view that the country-led system of evaluation being developed here should entail both research-oriented evaluation as well as being guided by evaluation frameworks. The former, in our view, as ‘force majeure’ in the base of a ‘pincer’ (like a pair of buffalo horns) provides rigorous data for decision-making and increasingly persuades stakeholders to use evidence to make better decisions and improve. The latter, in our view, and represented in the arms of a ‘pincer,’ increases the reach of evaluation beyond the norm, sensitise to the ‘insider’ voice to find ways to better achieve results, and in the end trains evaluators within the system to self-evaluate and improve, facilitated by evaluation specialists.

We hold, too, that in developing evaluation systemically here, we should avoid re-inventing the wheel, and derive strength from using researched evaluation frameworks conceptualised and tested internationally, and, adapt tested thinking to build into the system here indigenous conceptions of evaluation well adapted for M&E in this country. Within this context more specifically, we make the case for adopting an internationally recognised evaluation framework not well known or understood here, to strengthen evaluation systemically, which we refer to as facilitated self-evaluation. As argued by David Fetterman (2005), the framework synergistically extends mainstream evaluation practices concentrated at the base of the ‘pincer,’ so evaluators also reach out into institutions and communities where interventions have been, to facilitate self-evaluation, train evaluators to analyse data and improve their own practice, and thereby the system. In the end, the international experience suggests, a national evaluation system without evaluators self-evaluating to improve their own practice may limit its reach and thus its power to improve itself systemically and achieve its outcomes.

**Strengthening equity-focussed and gender-sensitive evaluation systems and evaluations**

Following from the above, and David Fetterman specifically, the SAMEA Board actively advocates for the values of equity, gender, social justice, empowerment, as well as improvement and an internal locus of accountability, amongst others. The case for these values is made through successive Key Note presentations by Fetterman at the SAMEA Conference and Workshop in 2001 and Workshop Series 2012, simultaneous and linked to the case for indigenizing M&E here drawing explicitly on Nan Wehipeihana’s thinking and experience in New Zealand.
And, consistent with conference themes, the Board increasingly considers important for ongoing advocacy of values in evaluation. A case in point, David Fetterman in 2011 and 2012 advocated for values explicitly underpinning empowerment evaluation in Key Note presentations and workshops year-on-year, to make them known and subject them to debate here, much as he has done internationally. A further benefit of continuity is not only identifying and advocating for values, but for values which cohere; his evaluation framework providing a logic binding the values underpinning his approach and hence evaluation thinking systemically. The Board also recognises what may be considered mainstream values implicit in evaluation approaches, adding to them through its conferences and workshops explicit values cohering in a framework to increase the reach of evaluation practice in institutions and communities.

**Strengthening a sustainable strategy to enhance individual capacities to conduct credible evaluations**

As the longest established entity strengthening the enabling environment for evaluation in South Africa, SAMEA has also a track record of enhancing individual capacity to conduct credible evaluations. In collaboration with the national and provincial governments, as well as with foundations, universities, independents and others, SAMEA grows individual M&E skills through annual capacity building workshops presented by local and international experts. Preceding its bi-annual Conference and in alternate years, SAMEA organizes a Workshop Series comprising in the order of 10-20 workshops, for the express purpose of enhancing individual M&E skills. Annually, these attract between 200-500 delegates as well as a growing group of ‘emerging evaluators’ sponsored on a competitive basis, to upgrade their evaluation skills, assist with job information and placement, and update on international best practice and latest developments in the field. In 2012 the Workshop Series held outside Gauteng (the economic centre of the country) in KwaZulu Natal, aimed to build capacity where most needed, and to launch a provincial association as stand-alone M&E association. This also provides a model for strengthening individual capacities to conduct evaluations which SAMEA has in mind to replicate going forward, as it provides capacity-building within a province as well as establishing a stand-alone provincial M&E association to organize capacity building and enhance credible evaluations provincially.

SAMEA’s bi-annual Conferences, furthermore, strengthen M&E capacity to conduct credible evaluations through sharing M&E experiences. Common to paper presentations, round table debates and panel sessions by state, local and international experts, is not only debate of approaches and tools but also exchanging experiences on practicalities which arise when conducting evaluations, to enhance their credibility.

In addition, SAMEA actively links to other organizations with similar objectives to its own. It did this in 2011 with the Wits Program Evaluation Group (Wpeg), a university-based group managing a database of materials from 25 specialist evaluators developing the field internationally, and intended as a resource to both strengthen capacity and the credibility of evaluations. Wpeg also organized a Virtual Symposium in parallel to the SAMEA Conference 2011, to extend debate to all at a price they could afford, and it intends to produce 5 or 6 e-texts on programme evaluation methodology for publication through its website ([www.wpeg.org.za](http://www.wpeg.org.za)). Both initiatives have in mind building capacity and enhancing the credibility of evaluations.

**Bottlenecks and Challenges**

Perhaps the most significant bottleneck for SAMEA Board members is work overload. Typically, members of the Board are busy professionals working long days on challenging assignments, to which is added SAMEA business. Whilst the latter may not be overly onerous, it nevertheless impacts Board member time and limits the time they are able to give to Board business, particularly in a Conference year. With this in mind, the Board in 2012 experimented with its Secretariat adding a stipended part-time position with designated time to spend on SAMEA business. This assisted the Board to consolidate its activities, and give practical effect to organizing its annual capacity building Workshop Series in KwaZulu Natal,
establish a formal KwaZulu M&E association in Natal, found the African Evaluation Journal (AEJ), and others.

A second bottleneck, as mentioned earlier, is stabilizing its income/funding stream. This was achieved in part in 2012, with some success, by turning around the Workshop Series to break even at least, and by targeting state departments and independents to seek Institutional Affiliation (IA) status with SAMEA. The former is anticipated to strengthen the Association’s financial position, and if successful, the latter should on its own create a revenue stream more-or-less equivalent to that in the past generated from Individual Membership fees and, thus, also contribute to easing the financial bottleneck of the Association.

To this end too, the Board adopted a principle to apply to its expenditures, namely that disbursements should be matched, pretty much, by income derived from them. With this in mind and a credit balance in the bank, the Board in 2012 has begun to re-think its organization and activities, and on this basis recoup expenses and stabilize funds in hand. Examples in this financial year include: the Workshop Series, developing ‘emerging evaluators’, part-time Secretariat, travel expenses of Board members, and hiring a workshop/conference organizer.

And in-kind support of SAMEA by an Institutional Affiliate providing office space, connectivity, printing and office equipment, and a facility for SAMEA Board meetings, addressed another historical bottleneck: physical space with facilities to house the Secretariat and a street address for the Association. We own the IA a deep debt of gratitude.

**Progress and Results**

The Board made significant progress on several fronts. With SAMEA sharing similar objectives on M&E to DPME with respect to strengthening capacity building and enhancing the credibility of evaluation, both agreed to form a Standing Committee (SC) and held regular meetings in 2012 to find common ground for co-operation on matters relating to evaluation. A general Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by both parties, cemented the relationship and set the scene for future collaboration. The MoU expresses the desire to collaborate on M&E issues of mutual interest. It assumes DPME as custodian of evaluation nationally and that it places a high value on having a committee formally linking it with SAMEA as national association, and it records SAMEA to be an independent voice, namely that of an outside expert advisory national M&E association and critical friend.

With CLEAR World Bank advisors’ experience in South America in mind on the form such a committee may take to be productive, the SC took a decision to constitute itself as an informal and low key committee, rather than being hierarchical with rigid protocols and structures, and to focus on specific areas of common interest to take forward. One result has been a three-way collaboration in 2002 to organize and run the SAMEA-DPME-DEDT Workshop Series in Durban. The SC now plans to make the results of state evaluations more widely known in government, and publically, especially disseminating findings of ‘best practice.’

Board meetings became more productive in 2012 with a shift from teleconference to face-to-face meetings. Besides teleconference meetings being difficult to organise and run, invoices justify face-to-face meetings as these were less than the cost of teleconferences. The shift made a significant difference to the business of meetings, and it strengthened confidence in decisions and activities. Developing a Plan of Action has been one consequence, which has helped Board members focus on listed tasks and keep focussed on them, and it enabled members to ease into their responsibilities for the Biennial Conference in 2013.

**Key Enabling Factors**

Two key enabling factors during 2012 which may be of interest to other associations are: a willingness of Board members to serve, to support and decide; and protecting our balance
sheet to grow cash in the bank. Both enabled the Board in its core business, namely, to serve the vibrant M&E community in the country.

First, there is tacit consensus that willingness of members to serve strengthened its business in 2012. Willingness to participate in debate, support new thinking and make decisions, even when protracted by negotiations and when different positions were taken, advanced the Board’s Agenda and its service to members. Examples enabling the Board do its work in the past year include: changing the individual membership fee collection system, signing the MoU with DPME, deciding Key Note speakers and workshop presenters for the Workshop Series 2012, Conference Theme 2013, and the like.

Second, it goes without saying that having money in the bank enabled the Board to consider options to serve its membership which otherwise may be difficult to discuss. Key in 2012 was for the Board to maintain and strengthen its balance sheet, and seen also in the principled decision it took: to match disbursements with income covering it. It shouldn’t be underestimated how powerfully cash in the bank worked for the Board in 2012. One example is it enabled the Board to take the risk and decide to organise and run the annual Workshop Series outside Gauteng where experience shows workshops to be viable, and to run it out-of-province where conventional wisdom in SAMEA holds that it may not be viable both in terms of delegate numbers and hard cash. In addition, attracting 40 more ‘warm bodies’ than planned for in the Workshop Series in 2012, also indicates how powerfully collaborations can work for both SAMEA and its collaborating partners, to achieve beyond what either may otherwise not be able to achieve alone.

Innovations going forward and Lessons Learnt:
Two innovations are suggested going forward: an evaluation ‘legotla’ or forum for the Board and untried suggestions to consider for Conference 2013.

Of the first, whilst most time in Board meeting is given over to policy, organization and activities, not much time is given for debating substantive M&E issues as these influence and are influenced by the business of the Board. Suggested for 2013, thus, is the Board arranging a ‘legotla’, or forum, aimed at substantive exchanges, debate and decisions on M&E entailed in its business. Papers could be presented and issues debated, to clarify issues and even develop position statements.

With respect to the pre-Conference Workshop Series and Conference 2013, several innovations are suggested. First, a Panel Session of DGs from national state departments where they present accomplishments and challenges, and to invite comments from the specialist M&E and informed citizenry. Underlying this is the intention to create an expanded culture of accountability at conferences, by providing DGs with a platform for reporting and soliciting feedback from an informed citizenry. Secondly, to have a paper session created specifically to connect papers, for example from the scientific community making the case for measurement and rigor in evaluation from schooling to profession. An example may be making the case for Advanced Mathematics in secondary schools, linked to a reminder of the importance of rigor in data and results in a case from research in Geo-chemistry, linked to evaluation of Engineering courses to prepare for quality entrants into the profession, linked to the scorecard as tool for gauging worth of engineering firms to qualify for government contracts. Third, a workshop on the back-end implications of implementing new frameworks in adopting institutions. The case can be made with reference to the financial sector where this has arisen from actuarial science graduates implementing new frameworks in financial institutions, to explore the applicability of back-end analysis in other sectors.

Next Steps
As it evolves presently, the Board has in mind a number of ‘next steps’. One of them is to build strong collaborative partnerships with organizations sharing SAMEA’s aims, to strengthen M&E activities beyond what it, or its partners, would be able to do alone. With Workshop Series 2012 in mind, collaborations of this kind are part of ‘next steps’ for the Board and may provide growth for its partners going forward.
The Board of Directors also aims to strengthen its income stream, to remain an independent M&E player nationally. The ‘no money’ concept for M&E associations seems under challenge in SAMEA in two respects: it is too demanding on volunteers and their resources; and two, there is a growing need of a part-time Secretariat to carry more of the work load of Board members. As above, steps are in place to create a steady income stream for the Association, which should be pursued by the Board going forward.

The Board also has put in place steps to increase the SAMEA membership pool and its activities which should better position the association to influence evaluation nationally. As above, new categories of membership (Institutional Affiliates) are in place and a strategy is in place to increase Individual Membership, the onus now being on the Board to use them to increase membership and influence. In parallel with these, membership can be strengthened through timely postings on its listserv, an enhanced website with regularly posted items of information and resources, newsletters, hardcopy of the AEJ included in what membership gets from SAMEA, and the like. These are in place and will need substantial inputs to grow membership beyond targets set to be achieved in 2012.

References