



BUILDING CAPACITY TO USE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Africa Evidence Network testimonials report

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Executive summary

The University of Johannesburg's programme to Build Capacity to Use Research Evidence (UJ-BCURE) currently supports the running of the Africa Evidence Network (AEN) as part of the funding received in 2014 from the UK Department of International Development (DFID). As UJ-BCURE prepares to wrap up its activities at the end of 2016, the AEN is engaged in activities to explore ways of sustaining its existence independent of donor funding. Some of the activities that will feed into a report detailing the potential of the AEN to sustain itself (available November 2016) include: a survey of the AEN membership, in-depth interviews with members, a business plan of the AEN's biennial conference EVIDENCE, and interviews with key informants with some experience of running or being involved in networks similar to the AEN.

This report discusses the themes that have emanated from the in-depth interviews with AEN members. It aims to share the benefits members have derived from being part of the AEN. Twenty interview participants – with over twenty backups – were selectively sampled (to achieve a distribution according to gender, designation, and region). Interviews were conducted in May 2016 with pertinent stories being extracted from the pool of participants that were contactable. Themes were then extracted from the summary transcripts of the pertinent stories and testimonial excerpts grouped according to the themes they illustrated.

In this testimonial report the reader will find summary paragraphs of each theme (the benefits derived by members of: staying informed and connected to the wider EIDM community; maintaining and creating connections; enhancing members' capacities to engage with EIDM; and changing practice). This report also contains the testimonial excerpts arranged in figures according to the themes they apply to. The report concludes with a brief summary of what the testimonials position the AEN as being: a conduit of opportunities for connection and learning in EIDM in Africa.

Introduction

Evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) is an offshoot of evidence-based medicine (EBM) where emphasis is given to the research evidence that practitioners and decision-makers base various social policies on. There is increasing pressure on decision-makers to engage with research evidence when making decisions, although in many cases particularly in Africa, decision-makers benefit from support in enhancing their capacity to do so.

The Africa Evidence Network (AEN) is a community of people with an interest in evidence, its production, and its use in decision-making in Africa, and it aims to be a structure that offers this exact support for practitioners and decision-makers in Africa when engaging in EIDM. This report forms part of a larger body of work that investigates various elements of sustaining the AEN beyond its current funding structure. Following is a brief description of the Network, and a discussion about how the member testimonials presented here feed into the larger thinking around sustaining the AEN. The methods for how these testimonials were collected is described before the testimonial excerpts are presented, grouped according to their themes. This report concludes with a brief summary of one possible way the AEN is perceived by members – based on themes from within their testimonials – and throw-forward to the AEN sustainability report (in preparation at the time of writing).

Background of the AEN

Founding

In December 2012, the Campbell Collaboration held a colloquium in Dhaka on Systematic Reviews in International Development. Attending the colloquium were a few delegates from Africa who, to varying extents, had backgrounds centred research synthesis methodologies and evidence use. This group included representatives from South African and Ugandan government, as well as colleagues from universities across Africa (Egypt to South Africa). These delegates decided to set time aside to meet during the colloquium, surprised by the large African contingent who had expertise in the field of evidence synthesis and evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM). Following a lively discussion about the necessity to stay in touch upon returning to Africa after the mini-colloquium, this group agreed that a mechanism for linking up people involved in EIDM should be developed to share their experiences and ideas around EIDM, and to share information in the field with one another.

Funding

In December 2012, with the original delegates at the Dhaka colloquium as the first 23 members (see Figure 1 for some of the founding members), the AEN was established with the remit to facilitate connections between EIDM practitioners in Africa with one another and the wider EIDM field. In late 2013 Prof Stewart at the University of Johannesburg secured funding from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) for a project entitled Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (UJ-BCURE). UJ-BCURE was funded as a project to increase the use of research evidence in decision-making for the benefit of people in South Africa and Malawi specifically (Stewart 2015); it ran from January 2014 until December 2016 and included considerable investment in the growth and development of the AEN.



Figure 1: Some of the 23 founding AEN members in Dhaka, 2012.

Governance

The founding chairperson of the AEN is Professor Ruth Stewart, head of the Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE) based at the University of Johannesburg as well as the UJ-BCURE project. The network's activities are coordinated by Professor Stewart in collaboration with members and external partner organisations. All the activities of the AEN are overseen and carried out by a coordinator¹ who during the first three years of the AEN operated out of the offices of the UJ-BCURE team. The AEN currently operates out of the offices of the ACE. The development of the AEN is guided by inputs from the Steering Committee of UJ-BCURE which consists of partners to end-beneficiaries of the UJ-BCURE programme.

Growth

After being founded by 23 initial members, the AEN grew by 81 people to 104 by the end of the first quarter of its inception year. By the end of that year, the AEN membership had increased by 146 members to include a total of 250 individuals. The 2014 AEN colloquium made great strides in boosting membership, pushing the number of AEN members up by an additional 104 people (to a total of 354) by the beginning of the first quarter of 2015. By the end of that year, the AEN membership had grown by 32% to a total of 523 members. At the time of writing², the AEN membership had grown to include 736 members from across the globe.

Remit

The remit of the AEN includes growing a community of EIDM practice on the continent to act as a conduit for improved EIDM in Africa. The network achieves this aim by playing a number of key roles, namely: promoting EIDM in Africa, building capacity in EIDM, sharing knowledge related to EIDM, and fostering a community of people dedicated to EIDM practice on the continent. These roles of the AEN are fulfilled by a variety of activities, including but not limited to resource-sharing, hosting of events, and dissemination of monthly newsletters and blog posts (AEN survey report, UJ-BCURE team).

Thinking beyond 2016

As the UJ-BCURE project prepares to wrap up its activities at the end of 2016, the AEN needs to look to its future and develop a strategy to continue with its activities in support of its remit. To this end, the AEN is developing a sustainability plan to guide the AEN into a future without direct donor funding. In order to develop the most suitable plan for making the Network self-sustaining, it is imperative to understand what the membership looks like and how they use the services offered by the AEN: these issues are reported on in the Survey Report (REFER TO SURVEY REPORT). A clearer understanding of what members gain from being part of the Network is also essential to consider when discussing

¹ At the time of writing, the AEN coordinator is Ms Precious Motha; Ms Hazel Zaranyika was the AEN coordinator at the inception of the network.

² 25 August 2016.

various options available to the AEN for sustaining its activities. As such, this report presents the testimonials from members of the AEN about what they gain from being part of the Network.

Methods

The AEN members to be interviewed for this testimonial report were sampled from the pool of survey respondents. To reflect the funder's interest in gender distribution, we sampled an equal proportion of men and women. We divided respondents up into three groups: those who work in the government sector, those who work in the research sector, and those who work in 'other' sectors (these would include members who work in NGOs). We also distributed the sample across the following geographic regions as far as possible: South Africa, Malawi, Zimbabwe, other African countries, and outside of Africa. The reasons for selecting Malawi and South Africa explicitly were that these were countries in which the activities of UJ-BCURE were based. Zimbabwe was explicitly selected because of the roadshow that took place there in 2016.

Forty potential interviewees were selected according to the sampling frame described above, with 40 'backups' also selected to 'match' the characteristics of each potential interviewee (as far as possible). We randomly selected an additional five names as further backups in cases where participants were proving contactable; these were inserted into the relevant categories within the sampling frame upon conclusion of the interviews. The following categories are unrepresented in the final set of completed interviews: a male government official from Zimbabwe, a female government official from Malawi, a female government official from South Africa, a male government official from outside of Africa, a male researcher from Malawi, a male researcher from South Africa, and a male practitioner from outside of Africa.

The interview schedule was created during a UJ-BCURE team workshop. The questions in the schedule served two purposes. First, the questions asked were intended to triangulate methods to test the reliability of the answers provided by respondents in the survey. The second purpose of the questions in the interview schedule was to draw out more in-depth answers to the survey question of how being part of the AEN had been valuable for members. These in-depth answers were to showcase the difference the AEN has made in terms of supporting EIDM on the continent, and to share these differences with members at the AEN Evidence 2016 conference in September.

The interviews were conducted telephonically with the participants who responded from the sampling frame from 10 May until 15 June by an external consultant of UJ-BCURE. In cases where the consultant was unable to accommodate an interview, one of the UJ-BCURE team conducted interviews.

AEN member testimonials

Members' testimonials gathered during interviews regarding the benefits members receive from belonging to the Network are presented below. Members were asked in the membership interviews to provide practical examples of how the AEN has been useful to them, specifically to their work. Below are summary paragraphs on the themes that emerged from members' responses, after which in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 are excerpts from summary transcripts of interviews, arranged according to the summarised themes. These themes that emanated from the testimonials are the benefits of: staying informed and connected to the wider EIDM community; maintaining and creating connections; enhancing members' capacities to engage with EIDM; and changing practice.

Staying informed and connected to the wider EIDM community

Overwhelmingly, members consistently stated the newsletter has been useful to them. When probed for an explanation of why specifically the newsletter had been helpful, many members stated that the

newsletter helped keep them updated and informed about the latest developments in the field of EIDM both internationally and regionally. Some participants took this further, stating that by staying informed of the latest EIDM developments they felt increasingly connected to other EIDM practitioners. One member commented on the fact that the newsletter allows her to learn lessons in EIDM from other members or organisations presented in the newsletter. In addition to learning from others, members commented that the AEN provided them with the opportunity to showcase their work with a target audience they knew were also interested in EIDM in Africa. This sharing was achieved primarily through the newsletter.

Maintaining and creating connections

Moving on from feeling connected to an extended community of civil servants, practitioners, and researchers interested in EIDM, members also found that the AEN assisted them in making contact with specific individuals or organisations. Particularly members noted that these connections further aided them in expanding their learning about EIDM and, in some cases, how to apply it / apply it better within their own professional roles. AEN hosted / coordinated events and the membership database on the website were seen as key in facilitating these connections.

Enhancing members' capacities to engage with EIDM

Across all designations, interviewed members shared stories of how the AEN / the Network's resources had assisted them in engaging in different ways with EIDM in their professional capacities. Different activities which were mentioned as having been enhanced in some way by membership to the AEN included introducing mentorship programmes in members' places of work, disseminating research via policy briefs, report writing, and workshops on EIDM and evidence synthesis methods.

Changing practice

Members also shared their experiences of the AEN as having assisted them in adapting their current practice or feeding into daily work activities of members. These experiences included integrating content on EIDM shared via the AEN website into members' workspaces. One member specifically mentioned how being part of the AEN had helped expose her to different opportunities that had shifted the way she thought about doing her job. She reported feeding this change in her thinking up to her managers.

Figure 2: Benefit of AEN membership – staying informed of and connected to the wider EIDM community / field

Male researcher from Nigeria:

...Interacting with other people that I met through the Network that do similar things that I do. I have also been introducing the Network to some people.

Female practitioner from South Africa:

The newsletter was great, because it was short and had links to things that may be of interest. For me that really worked well. Getting a nice sense of what was going on and to have a broader sense of EIDM outside of South Africa; I like the African focus. It has linked me to other stakeholders in the sector and it has shown me things that are happening elsewhere on the continent. It has given me a sense of who the stakeholders are in this sector, who the players are. It also helps me locate our own views in the broader [EIDM] context.

Female practitioner from Kenya

I have used the newsletter to read [through] and inform what I am doing, to learn lessons of what is happening on the ground, and to share what we are doing through the newsletter. The newsletter is useful because it is shared by email and...it provides information and tells you what is happening [in EIDM]. The influence [of the AEN] is more indirect: it affords me the opportunity to learn what others in a similar field are doing and to learn lessons from this.

Male government official from Malawi:

The email communications and the website are useful to me. Twitter I am always on and I get the updates as they come. The links that come up on Twitter provide me with more information. The challenge with the website is that it takes time to update so Twitter is more recent and in real time. You can have real time conversations.

Male researcher from Nigeria:

Periodic details on forthcoming conferences [and] keynote speakers, [the AEN] has kept me abreast of current trends in the field of information science... Some conclusions ([specifically that] some of the challenges encountered in maximising the benefits of ICT in a technological driven century [are] sometimes country specific) in [research] studies conducted by other AEN members have also helped to reinforce independent research [findings].

Female researcher in South Africa:

I am at [a research institute] and I am constrained because we do not have a big team: we have small money and a small team. So just the existence of [the] Network is useful because we can bounce ideas off each other. That adds value...and builds up a movement and some kind of [EIDM] awareness. It 'beefs' me up without me having to get more capacity [at my research institute]. We don't do training here – we just have some seminars so it is useful for me to be able to say I was involved in an AEN event. It ties me into something bigger.

Female researcher from South Africa:

[The AEN is useful] in terms of knowing about what has been undertaken out there, so it gives me a greater sense of community and feeling of belonging.

Figure 3: Benefit of AEN membership – maintaining and creating connections

Male practitioner from Zimbabwe:

[At the AEN conference] we interacted with a lot of experts and organisations and I learned quite a lot about what others are doing to promote EIDM. As an organisation we have also managed to grow. And learn what other people are doing in their various capacities, both regionally and internationally. I have been able to access resources that I was not previously aware of which has informed some of the research that I am doing. I got very good links through the AEN. Participating in the recent knowledge café was also great. Being part of AEN also brings credibility to our organisation and helps us to attract more high level participants to our events.

Male researcher in Nigeria:

[...] Writing for [the] newsletter is important because [as a researcher] I can publish my own research [and through this] ...build my network, the AEN network, and it will contribute to building the critical mass in our country, where it is important that we use evidence.

Female practitioner from Kenya:

I have used the website...to find opportunities in EDIM. So I learned about INASP through AEN.

Male researcher from Uganda:

I met public officials and ministers from my country at the colloquium. And now we work together and use evidence to inform policy. The AEN should continue what it is doing and continue providing opportunities, sharing information, and branding itself around bringing together different sectors: that is what is unique about the AEN. It brings together people from different stakeholders. ...Even among scientists there is a lack of understanding of synthesised research. I realised that what we need is a critical mass of scientists and knowledge brokers so that we can influence developments in the field. ...It is in that context that the AEN is so important. It facilitates collaboration for the building of this critical mass.

Male practitioner from Kenya:

I met a friend through the Network who has been very important to me in furthering my career. He has a lot of experience in evidence-based research and he has become a mentor to me. I only have three years of experience and he has 15 years [of experience]. I saw him on the AEN [member database] and I contacted him and he has become my mentor and it has helped me.

Female practitioner from Zimbabwe:

First, I attended the AEN event in 2014, where I learned a lot and met [a] good number of likeminded professionals. This helped to expand my network of evidence-based professionals, researchers, and knowledge management experts. Second – I have used the AEN website for knowledge resources and advertising about [the] services [of my organisation]. I often follow the tweets from AEN staff. The event is an opportunity to learn and get updated on new developments in the field as well as an opportunity for networking with likeminded professionals – and don't forget the opportunity to disseminate our work, publications, and share our experiences.

Figure 4: Benefit of AEN membership – enhancing members’ capacities to engage with EIDM

Male government official from Zimbabwe:

I am an economist in a research department [and am responsible for writing] policy briefs for our principles such as the secretary or the minister for presentation to forums such as Parliament. The AEN has gone a mile further in developing those skills that I use to produce the policy briefs and other reports. It has [had] a direct impact on my work. We were not trained to search for evidence on the internet. We had no idea of some of the search engines. And we did not know that we could check everything on the internet. ...We were also taught that not everything is useful information use... ...In terms of the format [and content] of the policy brief...[I now know] that...a policy brief should be short and that the brief should appeal to the recipient.

Female practitioner from Zimbabwe:

As a knowledge management expert and researcher the capacity-building resources and resource database, AEN events, and blog services are directly linked to what I do every day.

Female government official from Ghana:

The AEN gave us an opportunity to outsource capacity-building on evidence-based work and then having an external mentor to help build [our] capacity in terms of systematic reviews. Because I am in the research and evaluation section, the idea of using evidence is not new to us but it is good to see that there is recognition of the importance of this [EIDM]. With [the] AEN we had very specific needs – not general needs – and that is [the support] we got and this is what we used the AEN for.

Male government official from South Africa:

It has also linked us to researchers to help us with integrating evidence. We have always worked very closely with researchers in the science sector, but the newsletter does highlight different programmes and approaches and it reminds us of the importance of research. What has been most useful has been [the] workshops they arranged that we also attended with the DPME about two years ago. And last year there was a workshop where Phil Davies spoke which was very useful... The events and platforms have facilitated active engagements and opportunities for learning, so they have been useful. One example is that currently in the department we are working on [an] indigenous knowledge policy and we are understanding the importance of the research in this regard.

Male practitioner from Kenya:

The best example I can give is about the mentorship guidelines, because I introduced a mentorship and evaluation programme at my work, and I used the material that was provided by the AEN when I introduced the programme. I have also tried to introduce that to [other networks I belong to]. In a more personal capacity, I also use some of the information, especially from the training modules on the AEN website from UJ-BCURE about using resources to promote EIDM. I use those resources in evidence related training

Male researcher from Nigeria:

I recently completed a policy research project... and I had to complete a policy brief: ...the AEN facilitated this. I read the material on the AEN services and I used this. I made a presentation based on [the brief] last week. I also use material from AEN and from INASP in my work.

Male researcher from Tanzania:

[The AEN] has given me improved access to knowledge [resources] and increased my knowledge on evidence. It has also enabled me to access other networks: when you follow the blogs and reports in the newsletter, you link to other events and organisations, including webinars in the UK...that I was able to attend.

Figure 5: Benefit of AEN membership – changing practice

Male government official from Malawi:

I have used [the AEN] when I was doing my graduate degree in Australia. I used it to share ideas with [my] colleagues in Malawi. I am currently setting up the quality control department in the Ministry of Health, so one area [that I also use the AEN] is [in] making sure that we use evidence, and being linked up to [the AEN] Twitter and website has been very valuable to me. It has shown me ideas and areas for improvement, especially on systematic reviews.

Male government official from Malawi:

The focus on the use of evidence when we make decisions has become part of my thinking. I joined the network nine months ago, and now I tell my manager that everything we do and every decision we make must be based on evidence and specifically on research evidence. Where I was at that point, it was actually me, going to a meeting at a district level, and then coming from there, going to my workplace and me talking to the people at my workplace, it was me participating in the meeting and going back to my boss.

Female practitioner from Kenya:

On the capacity-building one, I was preparing material for one of the programmes that we are doing [and] I borrowed one or two statements from the capacity-building resources [on the AEN website]. I have learned from this material. And it has given me suggestions on how to do things.

Male researcher from Ghana:

As part of research uptake [and] communication efforts going on at my University, we develop research uptake stories as well as curate relevant stories from other sources for our website. To this end, I [now]...visit [the] AEN website to find interesting stories or get some insights into communicating interesting and relevant [research] stories on the website

Summary

Based on the above AEN member testimonials, the benefits that interviewed members receive from their membership centres around three areas: feeling informed of and connected to a wider community of EIDM; creating new and maintaining existing connections; enhancing members' capacity to engage with EIDM; and affecting change in the way that some members fulfil their professional roles. This section of the report briefly discusses how, from members' testimonials, the Network is seen as a conduit between not only individuals but also organisations. This perception of the AEN is mirrored in the social network analysis presented in the AEN Survey Report (UJ-BCURE team 2016) where the AEN was found to be effective at drawing to itself other EIDM organisations and connecting these – as well as the individuals within these – to others. By acting as a conduit between practitioners, civil servants, and researchers interested in EIDM in Africa, the AEN is able to support members in their endeavours to engage with EIDM in Africa. The AEN sustainability report should – in marrying together the various datasets used – explore more fully the implications that the benefits of membership has for the future of the Network. Indeed, that report should take as its departure point that the Africa Evidence Network's existence is integral to the notion that only by working as a community will EIDM becoming a reality in Africa.

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