CONFERENCE REPORT

From Johannesburg to Cairo: Two conferences about evaluation

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During March/April 2009 two important Evaluation conferences were held on the African continent. The International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS) held its Global Assembly from 18 to 20 March 2009 in Johannesburg and the Perspectives on Impact Evaluations Conference from 29 March to 2 April 2009 in Cairo, Egypt. Both conferences were preceded by days of workshops where very valuable and scarce skills were shared by world experts. As Evaluation (especially impact evaluation) is a relatively new discipline sharing skills and building a body of knowledge is a priority.

IDEAS GLOBAL ASSEMBLY

IDEAS is an independent association of evaluation professionals, those interested in evaluation, and those who seek to bring credible information and knowledge to the development agenda. The conference focussed on capacity building and all presentations were related to this theme. The pre-conference workshops included topics on capacity building of individuals in different evaluation methodologies such as using case studies and the ‘ten steps to results-based evaluation’.

The presentations on national level and cross country evaluation activities were well balanced with sessions on participatory evaluation methodologies.

One of the most noteworthy sessions was on technologies for fostering a culture for data-driven decision making and evaluation. The different presenters (with a strong South African presence) illustrated different electronic systems used to capture monitoring and evaluation data that strengthen project planning and activities. Systems such as DevInfo provide valuable information for decision makers (www.devinfo.org).

You can read more about IDEAS and the conference at http://www.ideas-int.org/.

I attended various workshops including those focussing on mixed methods, theory-based evaluations, realist evaluations and systematic reviews. The last two topics are in a sense a reflection of the diverse and possibly opposing discourses at the conference. Systematic reviews and other evaluation methods (such as those focussing on randomised control studies) were contrasted by those focussing more on context and qualitative methods (realist and realistic evaluations). The presentations and round-table discussions were at times heated and definitely very thought provoking.

Some of the presenters whom I have admired for years and whose books and articles I collect were present. Jess Dart, who started the Most Significant Change method (a narrative approach well suited to African development projects), presented
a new very holistic approach to national evaluations called the Performance Story Reporting Technique. Robert Chambers is one of the world experts on participatory methods. It is well worth reading some of his books (e.g., *Whose reality counts? Putting the first last*) and witnessing his ‘performance’ was a highlight for me.

The South African contingent was one of the biggest and definitely one of the most vocal groups! Our own South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) has been key in the development of Evaluation studies in Africa (www.samea.org.za). The SAMEA Conference will be held in August in Johannesburg and is sure to build on the Cairo momentum.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

**Madri Jansen van Rensburg** is presently working with NGOs in the SADC region doing research, monitoring and evaluation and organisational development work. She enjoys multi country and cross cultural studies using participatory methods and mixed methods approaches. She is involved with post graduate student supervision and research methodology lecturing.