

Africa Centre for Evidence, University of Johannesburg

Five Year Strategic Plan 2019-2023

The need

Poverty and inequality are complex and profound challenges for South Africa, and for Africa more broadly. Over a quarter of the continent's population is living with food insecurity.¹ Whilst literacy and health outcomes are improving across Africa, they remain the worst in the world. Furthermore seven of the 10 most unequal countries in the world are in Africa, including South Africa.² These challenges remain despite the not inconsiderable wealth across the continent: Africa has experienced robust economic growth averaging an annual increase of 4.5 percent since 1995, and investment in research and development is sizeable.²

By drawing on the whole evidence base to inform a decision, drawing on systematically collated and synthesised evidence, it is possible to ensure more reliable and more easily accessible evidence for decision-making. Using high quality evidence to inform decision-making has the potential to increase the effectiveness of policies and of their implementation, to reduce waste and avoid harm, to increase accountability and transparency, and to ensure decisions are more sensitive to social issues of equity and inclusion. As such evidence-informed decision-making has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the reduction of poverty and inequality in the region. Furthermore by working with others across the spectrum of evidence production and use, it is possible to draw on wider knowledge and experience, reduce duplication of effort, and maximise opportunities to make a positive impact.

The evidence-informed decision-making movement is often viewed as a technical approach that originates from 'developed' Northern countries, and yet the use of evidence in decision-making is not new to the South. The world has much to learn from approaches and innovations from the global South and from Africa in particular. Furthermore we are seeing a dual shift away from Northern knowledge systems as part of the decoloniality movement, and towards solutions that are 'made in Africa'. This search for local solutions is also reflected in shifts in capacity-development for the field. Whilst deficit models of African capacity can be flawed in portraying a model in which the North must build capacities in the South, there is a need for capacity development in evidence production and use across the continent,³ and a drive for home grown solutions to increase capacity.

For these reasons there is a clear need for African organisations working to increase the potential use of evidence for decision-making to address the priorities of the region, and ensure Africa's participation in the global movement to increase evidence-informed decision-making.

Over the last 20 years there have been a number of initiatives in South Africa to contribute to reducing poverty and inequality through increasing the use of evidence in decision-making. Many staff members from the Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE) have contributed to these initiatives, establishing strong relationships across the spectrum of evidence producers and users, building valuable experience and

¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO. 2017. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2017. Building resilience for peace and food security. Rome, FAO.

² Beegle, Kathleen, Luc Christiaensen, Andrew Dabalen, and Isis Gad- dis. 2016. Poverty in a Rising Africa. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-0723-7. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO.

³ Stewart, R., Nduku, P. & Langer, L. (2017) *Capacity in Africa: The results of a survey on support for and production of evidence maps and evidence syntheses, including systematic reviews*. Africa Centre for Evidence as secretariat to the Africa Evidence Network, University of Johannesburg: Johannesburg, South Africa. Available from: <http://tinyurl.com/y7edp4fy>.

expertise in the evidence ecosystem, and establishing a strong standing amongst the wider evidence community. Together our staff have supported capacity development, established and fostered the growth of networks, and specialised in the synthesis of the evidence base for decision-making in a number of areas. This included three years of work to build capacity to use evidence in governments in Southern Africa (a project known as UJ-BCURE); a programme of systematic reviews across the economic, social, and environmental sectors; support to the Africa Evidence Network; and more.

As a culmination of these initiatives and a reflection of the critical mass of experience, expertise, and networks that was established by 2016, the Africa Centre for Evidence was formally founded as a research centre within the Faculty of Humanities with a three-year charter (2017-2019) under the leadership of Professor Ruth Stewart.

ACE's vision

To see an end to poverty and inequality in South Africa and across the continent.

ACE's mission

To contribute to reducing poverty and inequality by increasing the use of evidence in decision-making.

ACE's values

The Africa Centre for Evidence is:

- i. Motivated by making a positive, rights-based, and socially-just difference;
- ii. Committed to equity and equality;
- iii. Focussed on building trust and relationships;
- iv. Dedicated to sharing capacity and opportunity;
- v. Respectful of others' expertise, experience and perspectives;
- vi. Committed to zero tolerance for any form of discrimination, harassment, or abuse;
- vii. Unwavering in delivering high-quality work, on time, and to budget.

The Africa Centre for Evidence is motivated by:

- i. Methodological rigour,
- ii. Innovative thinking,
- iii. Reflective practices,
- iv. Transparent practices and reporting.

ACE's strategic goals

In contributing to reductions in poverty and inequality through an increase in the use of research evidence, we work towards a spectrum of outcomes from raised awareness of evidence-informed decision-making, to enhanced capability to use evidence in decision-making, to actual use of evidence. We recognise that progress towards each of these outcomes is incremental, incorporating many small shifts that need to be measured and valued (success is not only a new evidence-informed policy, for example).

To these ends the Africa Centre for Evidence focusses on four strategic goals:

1. Greater understanding of the art and science of using evidence
2. Rigorous and relevant evidence synthesis
3. Meaningful evidence communities
4. Stronger evidence capacities

ACE's activities by strategic goal

We are committed to the following activities to achieve our strategic goals.

1. To advance the art⁴ and science of supporting evidence use – with a particular focus on evidence synthesis, evidence communities, and evidence capacities – we:
 - 1.1. Research and review the practical experiences and craft knowledge of people across Africa;
 - 1.2. Research and review the evidence about what works, how, and why;
 - 1.3. Research and review the contexts in which evidence-informed decision-making takes place, including political analysis; and
 - 1.4. Contribute to the development of theory and methods about evidence use.
2. To undertake and support rigorous and relevant evidence synthesis, we:
 - 2.1. Undertake evidence synthesis that is responsive to the needs and contexts of African decision-makers;
 - 2.2. Undertake 'global-good' systematic reviews that address questions of importance to decision-makers, populations, and civil society; and
 - 2.3. Develop and refine technologies for evidence synthesis production suitable to African contexts.
3. To nurture meaningful evidence communities – from broad open networks to smaller more focussed communities of practice – we:
 - 3.1. Foster collaboration among those engaged in or supporting evidence-informed decision-making;
 - 3.2. Increase knowledge and understanding of evidence-informed decision-making;
 - 3.3. Share capacities across the evidence-informed decision-making ecosystem;
 - 3.4. Improve the enabling context by promoting evidence-informed decision-making in Africa; and

⁴ We understand the art of using evidence to reflect the tacit knowledge and context-dependent experiences and perspective on evidence use.

- 3.5. Advocate for Africa's full voice and participation in the national, regional, and global movements to increase evidence-informed decision-making.
4. To strengthen evidence capacities for a wide range of stakeholders across the evidence ecosystem, we:
 - 4.1. Build capacities for evidence synthesis, ranging from capacity for conducting full systematic reviews to evidence maps and responsive evidence services;
 - 4.2. Build capacities for building and supporting evidence communities, from communities of practice to broad evidence networks; and
 - 4.3. Build capacities for evidence use.