



WORKING DOCUMENT

The integrated Theory of Change and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning system of the Africa Centre for Evidence

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This is a living manual internal to the Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE).

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Contents

1. Background	1
2. ACE's Theory of Change	1
i) Our desired impact and long- and medium-term outcomes.....	1
ii) Activities for achievement of our outputs.....	6
3. The monitoring, evaluation and learning system	8

1. Background

In our 2019-2023 Strategy, we laid out the reasons for why the Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE) was formed, our vision and mission, and our goals. This document reiterates our vision, mission, and values, and presents the results of our recent work to define our theory of change, our framework for monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), and our indicators. Our tools for MEL collection are referred to in the third section of this document.

Box 1: ACE's vision, mission, and values¹

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; and
- 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, and
- iv. Transparent practices and reporting.

2. ACE's Theory of Change

In 2020/2021, ACE embarked on a process of reviewing its processes for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL). As part of that work, we also developed our Theory of Change (TOC). This TOC in turn allowed us to identify MEL indicators and annual targets, and to develop data collection tools for our indicators.

i) Our desired impact and long- and medium-term outcomes

Our TOC draws on our goal of reducing poverty and inequality in South Africa and other African countries where we work directly, or through our delivery partners. We aim to achieve this goal through an increase in the use of evidence in decisions by those in a position to change or make policies. Changed policies based on evidence will be achieved through improvements in the enabling environment for the use of evidence (see Table 1).

¹ Africa Centre for Evidence: five year strategic plan 2019-2023.

Table 1: ACE's high-level results within our Theory of Change

IMPACT	Reduction of poverty and inequality in the African countries where ACE works directly or works with/through its partners.
LONG-TERM OUTCOME	An increase in the use of evidence in decisions at individual, organisational, and/or systems-level by those people who have the ability to change or make policies to reduce poverty and inequality in their communities in the African countries where ACE works directly or works with/through its partners.
MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOME	The enabling environment for the use of evidence for those people and/or their organisations and/or the systems in which they operate has improved.

Our theory is that the 'enabling environment' accumulates over time because of achievement of three or more of our short-term outcomes concentrated within the same country and within the same decision-making entity, such as a government department. The achievement of a short-term outcome can be achieved through a 'patchwork' of various projects or through a pre-designed initiative that deliberately delivers a package of services to the same decision-making entity across our portfolios.

Each of our four portfolios, as well as our communications team, work to achieve one key short-term outcome totalling five in all. These short-term outcomes are summarised in Table 2. The summaries of the outputs for each portfolio through which we work to achieve our short-term outcomes can be found in Table 3. It is worth noting that each of our outcomes are achieved through a combination of outputs and whilst we describe our outputs in the portfolio in which they are 'housed', the work of our portfolios is not mutually exclusive. Our teams work across projects and portfolios and frequently liaise and collaborate.

a. Short-term outcome and outputs of our Art and Science of Evidence-Use portfolio

The art and science of evidence-use portfolio aims to achieve advanced knowledge amongst partners, funders, and decision-makers of evidence-informed decision-making. In this portfolio, the team works to capture ACE's work and thought leadership, and the work of its partners, through the delivery of several outputs. These are:

1. Production of Masters and PhD theses on evidence-use,
2. Publication in academic journals of advancements in knowledge of evidence-informed decision-making,
3. Publication online of guides and manuals on the methods used by ACE to support evidence-informed decision-making,
4. Presentation of ACE's work at events, including academic conferences,
5. Facilitation of dialogues to engage others on key issues directly related to ACE's work, and
6. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning reports of ACE's work.

b. Short-term outcome and outputs of our Evidence Capacities portfolio

Our Evidence Capacities portfolio aims to deliver greater capacities for the use of evidence for decision-making within ACE, among our partners, and for the decision-makers we seek to influence. This result is achieved through the delivery of several outputs, specifically:

1. ACE staff having the necessary capacities (defined as knowledge, skills, and values) to increase evidence-informed decision-making and take responsibility to continue performing at their best,
2. Students who have completed their Masters and Doctoral qualifications related to evidence-informed decision-making,
3. Enhanced capacities of individuals and teams through participation in ACE-led courses or training,
4. Curated online platforms for enhancing evidence capacities through opportunities for connections and collaborations,
5. Extended individual and team learning relationships in the form of mentorships, internships, and post-doctoral placements provided by ACE staff to non-ACE staff, focused on evidence-informed decision-making and on sharing capacities through social learning, and
6. Facilitated communities of practice.

c. Short-term outcome and outputs of our Evidence Communities portfolio

Our Evidence Communities portfolio aims to deliver new and stronger collaborations amongst ACE, our partners, and other players in the African evidence ecosystem. This result is achieved through the delivery of several outputs, specifically:

1. Collaborations facilitated by ACE directly, or through our partners,
2. Connections – newly connected individuals, organisations, networks,
3. Engagement by AEN members with one another’s content facilitated by the AEN, and
4. Flagship events to raise the profile of Africa’s evidence community globally and provide opportunities for connections, collaborations, and engagement with our content.

d. Short-term outcome and outputs of our Evidence Synthesis portfolio

Our Evidence Synthesis portfolio aims to deliver improved access for decision-makers to evidence through the production of relevant, trustworthy, legitimate, and as-complete-as-possible evidence bases tailored to their needs. These evidence bases range from systematic reviews and evidence maps to rapid evidence responses. This result is achieved through delivery of two key outputs, specifically:

1. Production of evidence bases, and
2. Provision of evidence-informed advice.

e. Short-term outcome and outputs of our communications team

Our communications work is an essential part of raising awareness about the work of our four portfolios and as such has a dedicated goal within our theory of change. The work of the communications team aims to achieve advanced awareness of ACE’s work by stakeholders in general (and decision-makers specifically) in the evidence ecosystem. This result is achieved through:

1. Publicity to raise awareness of ACE’s publications and engagement events (via traditional media exposure, a vibrant social media presence, and promotional events),
2. Publications in popular media authored by ACE staff, and
3. Reports that document ACE’s development and promote the centre’s activities.

Table 2: The short-term outcomes of each of our portfolios

ART AND SCIENCE OF EVIDENCE USE	EVIDENCE CAPACITIES	EVIDENCE COMMUNITIES	EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS	COMMUNICATIONS
Advanced knowledge amongst partners, funders, and decision-makers of ACE's work, thought leadership, and the work of its partners.	Greater capacities for the use of evidence for decision-making within ACE, our partners, and the decision-makers we seek to influence.	New and stronger collaborations amongst ACE, our partners, and other players in the African evidence ecosystem.	Improved access for decision-makers to evidence through the production of relevant, trustworthy, legitimate, and as-complete-as-possible evidence bases tailored to their needs.	Advanced awareness of ACE's work by stakeholders in general and decision-makers specifically in the evidence ecosystem.

Table 3: The outputs through which each of our portfolios will achieve their short-term outcomes

ART AND SCIENCE OF EVIDENCE USE	EVIDENCE CAPACITIES	EVIDENCE COMMUNITIES	EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS	COMMUNICATIONS
A&S1: M&D theses on evidence-use	CAP1: ACE staff have the necessary capacities (defined as knowledge, skills, and values) to increase evidence-informed decision-making, and take responsibility to always perform at their best	EC1: Collaborations facilitated by ACE directly or through our partners	ES1: Production of evidence bases	COM1: Publicity to raise awareness of ACE publications and engagement events via traditional media exposure, a vibrant social media presence, and promotional events

A&S2: Publications in academic journals on advancements in knowledge of evidence-informed decision-making	CAP2: Completed masters and doctoral qualifications related to evidence-informed decision-making	EC2: Newly connected individuals, organisations, networks	ES2: Provision of evidence-informed advice	COM2: Publications in popular media authored by ACE staff
A&S3: Publicly available guides and manuals on the methods used by ACE published online	CAP3: Enhanced capacities of individuals and teams through participation in ACE-led courses or training	EC3: Engagement by AEN members with one another's content facilitated by the AEN		COM3: Reports that document ACE's development through the centre's activities (not contributions to portfolios; no analysis)
A&S4: Presentations of ACE's work at events, including academic conferences	CAP4: Curated online platforms for enhancing evidence capacities through opportunities for connections and collaborations	EC4: Flagship events to raise the profile of Africa's evidence community and provide opportunities for connections, collaborations, and engagement with our content		
A&S5: Facilitated dialogues to engage others on key issues directly related to ACE's work	CAP5: Extended individual and team learning relationships in the form of mentorships, internships, and post-docs provided by ACE staff to non-ACE staff, that are focused on evidence-informed decision-making and sharing capacities through social learning			
A&S 6: MEL reports of ACE's work	CAP6: Facilitated communities of practice (COPs)			

ii) Activities for achievement of our outputs

For each portfolio, we have designed our activities to ensure that each area of work contributes to achieving our outputs. This intentional focus on activities that contribute to our outputs and short-term outcomes protects our team from being with activities that do not fit within our theory of change and which may distract us from achieving our impact.

Below we summarise the key activities within each portfolio and within our communications work. Note that these activities are not measured within our monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) indicators but rather are tracked through our project management processes. It is worth noting that each of our outputs and outcomes are the result of a combination of activities. Activities across portfolios often combine to deliver our outputs. They are not entirely independent of one another and teams regularly work together. Nevertheless, for the purpose of clarity of project and staff management, activities are 'housed' within specific portfolios as described below.

a. Activities within our Art and Science portfolio to achieve our desired outputs

Each of our outputs and outcomes are the result of a combination of activities. Activities across portfolios often combine to deliver our outputs. Our activities within our Art and Science portfolio are listed below:

- Writing and documenting for publication
- Thinking and debating internally
- Thinking and debating through learning exchanges with partners
- Researching the art of evidence-use
- Reviewing the published science of evidence-use
- Sitting on national or international advisory boards
- Attending evidence-informed decision-making events run by others including academic conferences
- Hosting national and international visitors
- Visiting other evidence centres
- Actively participating in the academic culture of our university
- Monitoring, measuring & evaluating

b. Activities within our Evidence Capacities portfolio to achieve our desired outputs

Each of our outputs and outcomes are the result of a combination of activities. Activities across portfolios often combine to deliver our outputs. Our activities within our Evidence Capacities portfolio are listed below:

- Providing support through bursaries to ACE staff to complete evidence-informed decision-making relevant qualifications
- Identifying collective staff development needs, based on individual staff development plans for each year
- Supporting staff development through event attendance, on-the-job-training and mentoring, National Research Foundation-rating applications, etc.
- Individual and collective supervising of others' research (masters and doctoral students) through monthly online meetings and one-on-one meetings via online platforms
- Providing financial support to masters and doctoral students focused on evidence-informed decision-making with registration costs

- Quarterly supervisors' meeting to reflect on and learn from one another about effective supervision
- Running short learning programme(s)
- Offering mentorships, internships, secondments, and other learning exchanges
- Designing and running online platforms for learning and sharing
- Curating a resource database of evidence on 'evidence capacities' as well as a database of who is involved in evidence-informed decision-making capacities in Africa
- Facilitation of events, workshops, sessions, and engagements that encourage sharing of learning and capacities, both hosted by ACE and by others
- Conducting research on evidence capacities

c. *Activities within our Evidence Communities portfolio to achieve our desired outputs*

Each of our outputs and outcomes are the result of a combination of activities. Activities across portfolios often combine to deliver our outputs. Our activities within our Evidence Communities portfolio are listed below:

- Identifying experts in evidence-informed decision-making within our networks and connecting them with others, indirectly through promotion of them and their work (e.g. by spotlighting them in a monthly newsletter) and via direct introductions (either within the network or between those who are not yet members)
- Creating platforms where members can interact and collaborate for evidence-informed decision-making (e.g. website, social media, events)
- Coordinating joint projects and develop shared outputs with partners and members
- Partnering with strategic evidence-informed decision-making partners and evidence community members to plan and deliver joint events
- Coordinating joint funding applications with strategic partners
- Coordinating and inviting joint writing of content with partners and members
- Building and maintaining relationships with ACE partners and our evidence community members
- Coordinating working groups
- Coordinating and contribute to relevant governance bodies, including the AEN Advisory and Reference Groups, attendance on the CEE Board, and others
- Using a wide range of ways to connect individuals and organisations (e.g. through events, social media engagement, etc.)
- Spotlighting individuals and organisations using different platforms (e.g. Africa Evidence Leadership Award, social media engagement, newsletter publication, etc.)
- Developing a technological strategy to enable connections and engagement
- Coordinating the annual Africa Evidence Leadership Award
- Identifying existing connections between individuals and organisations within the network to identify potential for new connections, and for deeper connections and collaborations

d. *Activities within our Evidence Synthesis portfolio to achieve our desired outputs*

Each of our outputs and outcomes are the result of a combination of activities. Activities across portfolios often combine to deliver our outputs. Our activities within our evidence synthesis portfolio are listed below:

- Engaging with stakeholders for mapping scope
- Developing inclusion criteria

- Developing search strategies
- Searching for evidence
- Screening of evidence
- Data extraction
- Critical appraisal
- Synthesis
- Reporting and disseminating findings
- Tailored advisory and communication products such as briefs and summaries
- Methodological advancement of evidence synthesis
- Developing internal guidelines and tools for evidence synthesis project delivery

e. Our communications activities to achieve our desired outputs

Each of our outputs and outcomes are the result of a combination of activities. Activities across portfolios often combine to deliver our outputs. Our communications activities are listed below:

- Publicising and promoting ACE's work on digital platforms
- Planning and executing multi-pronged communications campaigns that advocate for evidence-informed decision-making and ACE's work to promote it
- Drafting all text content for various platforms
- Coordinating the development of all digital content and report layouts
- Copyediting and compiling content received from colleagues into external and internal newsletters and reports
- Designing social media graphics and branding videos
- Providing editorial support to colleagues and senior leadership to draft and edit popular writing publications
- Maintaining and nurturing media relationships both within and external to the University of Johannesburg in drafting, preparing, planning, sharing, facilitating, and editing press releases, news articles, interviews with experts.
- Developing and maintaining an ACE expertise database shared with UJ media

3. The monitoring, evaluation and learning system

- Monthly indicators – available on request from ace@uj.ac.za.
- See our [Stories of Change and the Most Significant Change manual](#)