

A New Look at Impact Evaluation Capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa

Norma Altshuler and Sarah Jane Staats, based on research conducted by the Africa Centre for Evidence

Impact evaluation and other forms of research that have the potential to inform policy decisions are becoming more prominent in sub-Saharan Africa. And while researchers working in their own countries bring contextual knowledge, relationships, and sustained attention that help ensure results are used in policy decisions, many research teams funded by donors do not include them in a meaningful way. This may be due to a common perception that there is a lack of qualified in-country researchers.

The results of this study, conducted by Yvonne Erasmus and Sunet Jordaan at the Africa Centre for Evidence, show that perception is mistaken.

The study found 1,520 African researchers with African affiliations had authored at least one impact evaluation. These researchers, many of whom were trained at elite U.S. and European institutions, represented 34 different African countries. This brief highlights the study's high-level findings and offers recommendations for leveraging—and building on—existing capacities.

Research Goals

Good evidence about impact is inextricable from just, equitable outcomes. Too often, there has been a lack of robust evidence about what kinds of policies best achieve those outcomes, about what impact a program has—or whether it works at all.

Fortunately, in the last decade, there has been a tremendous growth in the use of impact evaluations—and in evidence-informed policy initiatives more broadly.

That trend has been driven by international donors and governments alike. But most impact evaluations are conducted by European and American researchers. The obvious expense of commissioning research from teams outside of the countries of interest has been explicitly or tacitly justified on the grounds that many regions, and particularly sub-Saharan Africa, lack in-country researchers capable of conducting high-quality impact evaluations.

Impact Evaluation Defined

A type of evaluation design that assesses the changes that can be attributed to a particular intervention. It is based on models of cause and effect and requires a credible counterfactual to control for factors other than the intervention.

Norma Altshuler, program officer at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, commissioned researchers at the Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE) to obtain empirical information about the quantity and type of impact evaluation capacity in sub-Saharan Africa. The multi-method scoping study included semi-structured interviews, a survey, follow-up interviews with a subset of survey respondents, desk research, and an impact evaluation author search.

Key Findings

The study uncovered far more local impact evaluation capacity than one might anticipate. Overall, 1,520 African researchers with African affiliations, representing 34 different countries, have authored impact evaluations (see Figure 1). Around 13% of those

researchers have been listed as first author, and in 14% of all publications, all listed authors were African and had African affiliations.

In addition, the study uncovered capacity across all four surveyed regions, with particular strengths in Southern and Eastern Africa (see Figure 2).

As is typically the case in the impact evaluation field, the health, nutrition, and population sector dominated, accounting for 77% of studies. Agriculture and education were also well represented, accounting for 10% and 8% of studies, respectively.

This author search likely underestimates capacity. Interviewees stated that publishing research results is not always incentivized, particularly for researchers not affiliated with universities. While that is changing—many funders now require academic publications as a condition of funding—an author search may still undercount scholarship by local researchers. Additionally, these findings only include impact evaluations up to 2015; the study authors confirmed the upward trend in African authors with African affiliation continued between 2016 and 2018.

The researchers also reasoned that offering training in impact evaluation may be good evidence that local capacity exists. Therefore, the study included interviews, a survey, and desk research to help uncover these additional pockets of capacity. It found two-thirds of sub-Saharan African countries offer some form of impact evaluation training.

Southern Africa

Southern Africa has the highest capacity overall, with South Africa standing out as particularly strong. That said, almost every country in the region has at least some capacity, and the universities of Zimbabwe and Malawi rank quite highly in the overall author search (see Figure 3).

Eastern Africa

Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya have particularly strong evidence of capacity. All feature prominently

in the author search and have significant numbers of impact evaluation training opportunities (see Figure 2). East Africa is also home to the highest number of researchers that were first authors on publications.

Western Africa

Capacity in Western Africa is concentrated in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal. Overall, the region has far fewer authors. In interviews and surveys, respondents did not mention any pockets of capacity in a higher percentage of countries from this region (see Figure 2).

Desk research uncovered more capacity than author search and interviews suggested. Two possible explanations for the discrepancy may be that English proficiency limits publishing opportunities in the largely Francophone Western African countries, and that no supplementary searches were conducted to identify additional publications in French.

Nevertheless, the researchers found 337 authors across 14 countries in Western Africa, indicating growing capacity.

Central Africa

The strongest evidence of capacity in the region is in Cameroon. Although Cameroon did not feature prominently in the author search, it has a number of institutions with strong impact evaluation capacity. Central Africa also had some of the most significant gaps—there was limited to no evidence of capacity to conduct impact evaluations in four of the five countries in the region (see Figure 2).

Additional Findings

Several African institutions have dozens of impact evaluation scholars

Authors affiliated with over 30 different organizations representing 17 countries have produced five or more impact evaluations. The largest concentration of these are in South Africa, with four of the top 10 institutions located in the country. Uganda's Makerere University had the highest concentration of researchers, at 66 (see Figure 3).

More than 9 in 10 impact evaluation publications focus on three sectors: health, agriculture, and education

As is true more generally in the impact evaluation field, the health, nutrition, and population sector dominated impact evaluation studies, accounting for more than three in four publications. The agriculture and rural development and the education sectors are a distant second and third, respectively. The remaining eight sectors combine for just 5% of all publications (see Figure 4).

Impact evaluation training is on the rise

Many scholars report receiving training at universities outside of Africa. Within Africa, impact evaluation training was offered in two-thirds of African countries. The majority of training is presented at universities, though a number of other local and international nongovernmental organizations also offer training.

A large number of short courses and workshops—typically ranging between two and ten days—focus specifically on impact evaluation. Additionally, accredited monitoring and evaluation courses in Africa that focus on monitoring and evaluation typically include at least one module on impact evaluation.

The researchers did not analyze the quality of training programs, but reasoned that where organizations offer training in impact evaluation, there may be interest and capacity for impact evaluation within that institution.

Recommendations

The research and analysis conducted by Africa Centre for Evidence's Yvonne Erasmus and Sunet Jordaan leads us to make the following recommendations for peer funders, organizations that strengthen impact evaluation capacity, and impact evaluation researchers in Africa and around the globe.

Continue to build impact evaluation expertise, and use it

The impact evaluation capacity that exists among in-country researchers in many African countries is the result of investments in training and other forms of capacity development over the past decades. These efforts have borne fruit, and there are now many qualified scholars that can engage in research. Local experience in impact evaluation exists across sub-Saharan Africa, and there is expertise in sectors like health, nutrition, and population. Moreover, African authors are especially well positioned to shape policy-relevant research questions and to encourage policymakers to act on the results. Funders who currently rely on European or North American researchers could supplement that work with local experts. Similarly, those funding development projects that do not currently include impact evaluations could draw upon a large pool of local expertise to shape, assess, and inform projects.

Help build centers of excellence

Junior researchers working within institutions that conduct impact evaluations are more likely to have opportunities to further build and apply their expertise. The study found there is considerable impact evaluation research infrastructure in universities, particularly in the faculties of health and schools of public health. Additionally, several think tanks have begun building their own impact evaluation capacity, and others are considering doing so. Existing pockets of capacity offer the foundation, experience, and intellectual energy to conduct research and train others.

Encourage collaboration across continents

Both African and non-African scholars reported benefits of collaboration across continents. Several emerging African scholars reported that co-authoring with well-known scholars from other continents helped them build credibility and created opportunities for future work. Non-African researchers reported that their African co-authors provided technical capacity, context to better situate the work, and relationships to help drive policy

impact. Practitioners should consider establishing norms and best practices for partnerships, since both African and non-African scholars said clear communication and an equitable distribution of responsibilities are essential.

Support opportunities for African scholars to work together

The researchers' discussions with African scholars revealed that often, African scholars are not connected to their peers. Impact evaluation practitioners often were unaware of others at institutions in the same country. African scholars that have interacted and worked with each other—including scholars who connect across sectors and have benefited from prior capacity development efforts—report that this leads to peer learning and research and training collaboration.

Funding channels may need to be reoriented

North American and European researchers are typically able to raise funds for research more easily than African researchers, given existing networks, fundraising capacities, and persistent beliefs about signals of quality. Funders wishing to more effectively deploy existing research capacity in African countries—capacity that in many cases was developed through earlier donor investments—may need to take special steps to design funding opportunities for African research teams, including conducting proactive outreach, investing time to work with organizations that have less experience with large funders, and looking beyond prior peer-reviewed publications to judge capacity and quality.

Methodology

This study was conducted between July 2018 and May 2019 by Yvonne Erasmus and Sunet Jordaan. Research ethics approval was obtained through the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee.

The researchers conducted an author search using the 3ie Impact Evaluation Repository (IER), supplemented by a systematic academic search. The 3ie search covered the years 1990 through 2015, and includes journal articles, book chapters, working papers, and reports that meet 3ie's screening standards.¹ For the 3ie search, researchers used the *impact evaluations* and *sub-Saharan Africa* filters, and excluded papers where there were no African authors with African affiliations. The researchers also conducted a supplemental academic search of BSOHost: Africa-Wide Information, Academic Search Complete, and Econlit articles published from 2016–2018.

These results confirmed that the upward trend in African authors with African affiliation continued between 2016 and 2018. While the study did not include a systematic assessment of the quality of the research design in the search results, researchers did note that several studies appeared in prominent journals.

Erasmus and Jordaan supplemented the author search with a search of institutional capacities for conducting impact evaluations. This research conducted key informants interview; a survey in which they asked respondents to list other organizations that they believed had impact evaluation capacity and collected affiliations from respondents who indicated that they personally had impact evaluation experience; and in-depth interviews with targeted survey respondents.

Finally, the researchers conducted a desk review that analyzed all existing accredited and non-accredited evaluation programs and courses offered in West, East, and Southern Africa. The search covered trainings conducted from January 2014.

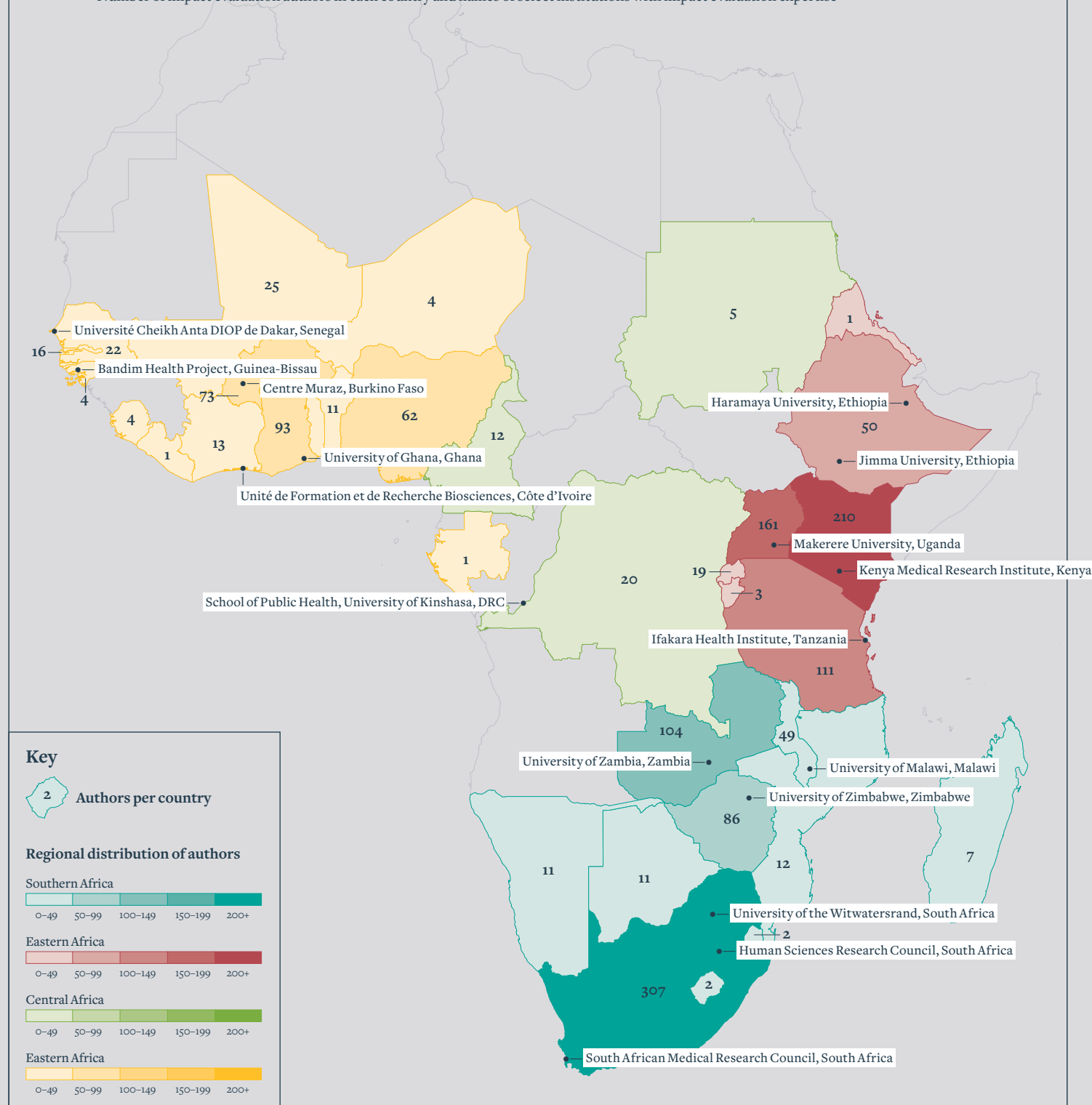
Learn more about the Hewlett Foundation's support for evidence-informed policymaking at <https://hewlett.org/strategy/citizen-voices-and-evidence-informed-policy>

¹ The 3ie Impact Evaluation Repository is at <https://www.3ieimpact.org/evidence-hub/impact-evaluation-repository>

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Figure 1: Impact evaluation capacity exists in at least 34 of 46 countries in sub-Saharan Africa

Number of impact evaluation authors in each country and names of select institutions with impact evaluation expertise



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Figure 2: Researchers in Eastern and Southern Africa have authored the most impact evaluations

Number of impact evaluation authors by country

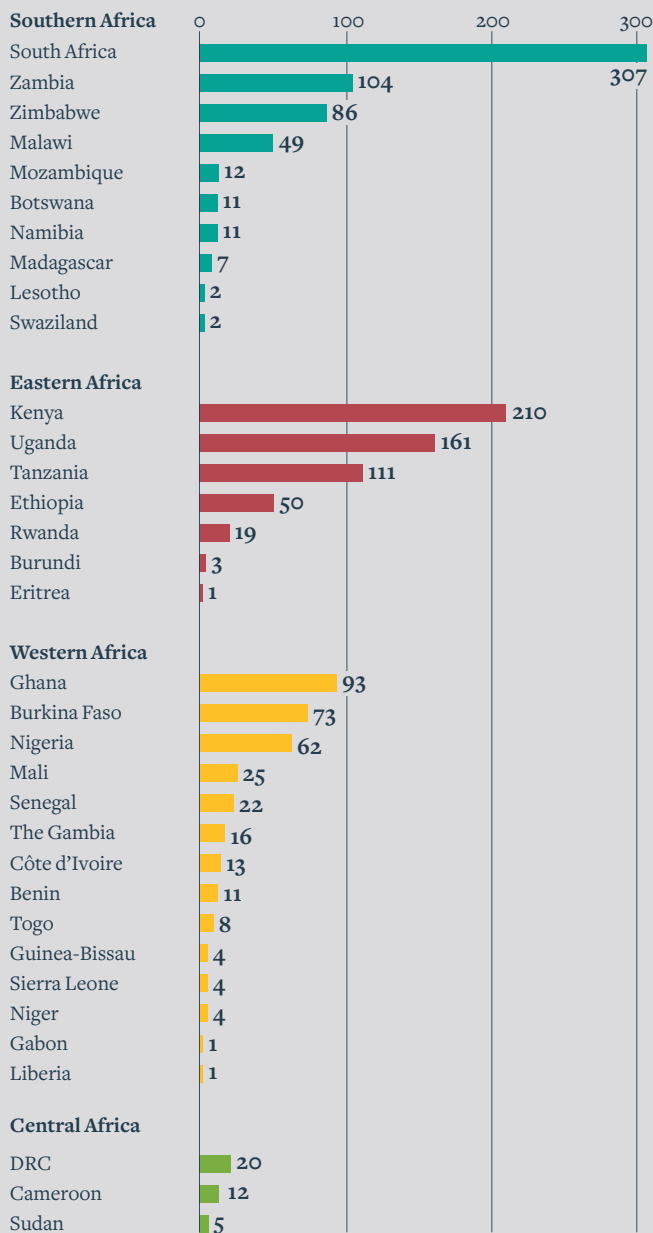


Figure 3: Several African institutions have dozens of impact evaluation scholars

Number of impact evaluation authors affiliated with each institution

Institution	Country	Authors*
Makerere University	Uganda	66
South African Medical Research Council	South Africa	58
University of Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	53
University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa	52
University of Cape Town	South Africa	46
Kenya Medical Research Institute	Kenya	44
Ifakara Health Institute	Tanzania	30
University of Nairobi	Kenya	29
Centre National de Recherche et de Formation sur le Paludisme	Burkina Faso	22
Human Sciences Research Council	South Africa	22
University of Bamako	Mali	20
National Institute for Medical Research	Tanzania	20
University of Malawi	Malawi	18
Centre Muraz	Burkina Faso	16
Muhimbili University	Tanzania	16
Uganda Virus Research Institute	Uganda	15
University of Zambia	Zambia	15
University of Ghana	Ghana	13
Centre for the AIDS Program of Research in South Africa	South Africa	13
Centre for Infectious Disease Research	Zambia	13
Medical Research Council - LSHTM	The Gambia	12
University Teaching Hospital	Zambia	12
Biomedical Research and Training Institute	Zimbabwe	11
Jimma University	Ethiopia	10
Moi University	Kenya	10
Infectious Diseases Research Collaboration	Uganda	10
Manhiça Health Research Center	Mozambique	9
School of Public Health, University of Kinshasa	DRC	8
Bandim Health Project, INDEPTH Network	Guinea-Bissau	8
Université Cheikh Anta DIOP de Dakar, Faculté de Médecine	Senegal	8
Unité de Formation et de Recherche Biosciences, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny	Côte d'Ivoire	7
Haramaya University	Ethiopia	6
Programme National de Lutte contre le VIH/Sida	Togo	5

* In interpreting these findings, it is important to take note that the author affiliations listed in the articles may be outdated. It is possible that the authors are not presently at the organizations found in the search.

Figure 4: 95% of impact evaluation publications focus on three sectors: health, agriculture, and education

Number of impact evaluation publications by sector

