Note on the Africa Evidence Network Conference (20 – 22 September 2016)

EVIDENCE 2016 - ENGAGE. UNDERSTAND. IMPACT

EHPSA attended the Evidence 2016 Conference held from 21 – 23 September 2016 in Pretoria, South Africa. The conference was arranged by the Africa Evidence Network. The conference plenaries, abstracts and other training / workshop sessions were arranged around three separate themes for each day. Day 1 focused on “engage”, day 2 on “understand”, and day three on ‘impact’.

During day 1, “engage”, the focus was on engaging stakeholders as a critical part of evaluations and increasingly also for monitoring. During the first plenary the South African Minister for Science and Technology made the critical observation that the “evidence-based policy making” agenda misses the critical point that policy makers do not only engage with evidence in making policy, but that they also have to respond to public expectation. And this interplay between public expectation and evidence for policy making is not always sufficiently taken into account. In short she said “science or evidence informs advice but on its own does not make policy”.

During the final session on day 2, a panel discussion between seasoned and senior South African bureaucrats about their experiences of understanding and engaging with “evidence”, returned to this theme where it was clear that “politics” in all cases trumps evidence.

With regard to stakeholder engagement for evidence-informed approaches the most informative discussion was around “deliberative dialogues” to draw in a wide range of stakeholders around a pressing challenge, preventing options (evidence) and implementation considerations.

The ‘understand’ theme on day 2 was largely a presentation of different methodologies and their application in both the public and non-state sector. The methodologies ranged from case studies to different approaches to capacity building to strengthen the use of evidence in policy making and planning, as well as interesting examples of creating evidence maps and the processes required for these.

For the purposes of EHPSA, a regional programme, the most instructive discussion focused on the problem of external validity – when can evidence from one context be useful for decision-making in another? In short external validity addresses the question “but will it work for us?”. The discussions suggested possibilities to better address this question will be led by more systematic / critical reviews, quasi-structural approaches and statistical extrapolation where possible.

Day 3 ‘impact’ returned to the theme of networks and stakeholders, and through building these relationships increasing the possibilities for greater impact in using evidence.

Main headlines:

• Stakeholder engagement and networks matters for all evidence uptake.
• Building relationships are crucial for evidence use.
• Evidence alone is not enough for uptake – politics always trumps evidence & public expectation equally informs policy making.

Louis du Plooy, EHPSA