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UCT lecture explores the evolution of evaluation practice



Prof Sarah Chapman

Photo: Je'nine May

What does it mean to measure what truly matters? At the University of Cape Town (UCT), Professor Sarah Chapman used her inaugural lecture to challenge conventional notions of evidence and evaluation, urging a rethink of how knowledge is generated, interpreted and applied for social transformation.

Titled, "Measuring what counts: Evaluation as inquiry, power and possibility", the lecture also delved into other realms such as the evolution of evaluation practice. Professor Chapman is an internationally recognised thought leader in evaluation theory and practice, with over 20 years of experience in Sub-Saharan Africa and globally. She is the director of UCT's [Institute for Monitoring and Evaluation](#), within the [School of Management Studies](#), and the deputy dean for postgraduate studies in the Faculty of Commerce, where she co-convenes the university's postgraduate programmes in Programme Evaluation.

"All of us, no matter our background or profession, engage in evaluative thinking every day. We assess, compare, judge and reflect. We can't help but evaluate. It's intuitive, and that's part of its power," said Chapman.

There's a paradox, however. "Because evaluation feels so natural, we often underestimate the craft it takes to do it well. The challenge lies in sharpening that instinct, applying scientific principles, ethical reasoning and structured methods, while still leaving room for context, voice and intuition. Good evaluation doesn't override human judgment, it strengthens it."

Chapman added: "Evaluation isn't just a method, it's a mindset. It's one of the most dynamic, evolving and deeply human disciplines of our time." Over the years, she has experienced evaluation in different forms – a first wave of foundations and causality. The second wave relates to rigour, impact and policy influence. There is also a third wave of complexity, justice and pluralism.

As an experienced field practitioner, she has led evaluations across public health, agriculture, education, early childhood development and disability sectors throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Implementation evaluator

Take her time with the [Millennium Villages Project](#) evaluation team as one example of her illustrious career. The model was bold: invest US\$120 per person, per year, in a dozen rural African communities. Deliver a comprehensive package of proven interventions – better seeds, fertiliser, mosquito nets, clean water, healthcare, schools and sanitation. It was about delivering everything that works, all at once.

"I was told there wasn't really space on the impact team. Instead, I'd be joining the implementation evaluation team. I knew a little bit about impact evaluation from my research training (although to be honest it was mainly restricted to fertiliser plots, locusts and tea-tasting experiments). But implementation evaluation? I had no idea what we were meant to be doing.

"In theory, an implementation evaluation sounds straightforward. When a programme produces impact, everyone is happy. But when there is no measurable impact, more explanations are generally needed. Unfortunately, there is often not much information on what went wrong because all the money has gone into measuring impact. This is what is called a black box evaluation. The role of implementation evaluation is to narrow down the cause of failure to two possible causes. First, theory failure: the core idea was flawed. You thought doing X would lead to Y, but the causal link just isn't there.

"The second is implementation failure. The theory is sound; the evidence is solid, but the delivery fell short. It wasn't done properly, or at all. We messed up. In the Millennium Villages Project, that black box was especially large. This wasn't one intervention; it was a bundle."

The lesson learned is that evaluation works well for single interventions. Combine 30, and causality gets messy. Another challenge is that the theory on implementation evaluation was tailored for smaller and controlled settings.

Chapman shared that at the end of that project she was determined never to be caught off guard again, especially on high-profile projects, without a rigorous impact evaluation plan.

“No more hopeful baselines. No more being caught on the backfoot when it came to applying classic experimental principles.

“I slowly began asking a different question. Not so much ‘Can we prove impact?’ but more simply just, ‘Can we explain what this programme is trying to do and why you even believe it should work?’ before we even rush around and start collecting data,” she said.

She concluded: “Evaluation is about learning, not just auditing. It’s not about proving but improving. The second is that it demands humility and pluralism as no method or worldview holds all the answers. Thirdly, it is relational and contextual: who defines success matters. Lastly, it is hopeful work as it assumes that people and systems can improve.”

Story by Kamva Somdyala, UCT News

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